LASCELLES ABERCROMBIE

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Lascelles Abercrombie

The Poems of
LASCELLES ABERCROMBIE

LONDON
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
HUMPHREY MILFORD
1930

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
AMEN HOUSE, E.C. 4
LONDON EDINBURGH GLASGOW
LEIPZIG NEW YORK TORONTO
MELBOURNE CAPETOWN BOMBAY
CALCUTTA MADRAS SHANGHAI
HUMPHREY MILFORD
PUBLISHER TO THE
UNIVERSITY

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN

PREFACE

THIS collection consists of the poems and plays contained in the following volumes: *Interludes and Poems* (1908), *Emblems of Love* (1912), and *Deborah* (1913), published by John Lane; *Four Short Plays* (1922), *Phoenix* (1923), and *Twelve Idyls* (1928), published by Martin Secker; and *The Sale of Saint Thomas* (1911) published by myself. I must express my gratitude to Messrs. John Lane (The Bodley Head) Ltd., and to Messrs. Martin Secker Ltd., for their kindness in allowing the collection to be made; and it is right that I should record my sense of the peculiar honour which its inclusion in this series confers. The invitation to collect these pieces for publication by the Oxford University Press was one which I could not but accept with the keenest pleasure; I allowed it to overbear a certain unwillingness to bring together poems which, to me, must chiefly represent unrealized ambition.

The plays have been grouped together at the end of the book, and the shorter poems at the beginning. For the rest, I have kept the chronological order of publication. This does not exactly correspond to the order in which the poems were composed; but the *Interludes* and the *Idyls* each form a set of experiments in a certain kind of writing, and *Emblems of Love* was meant to be taken as a single poem.

The distinction between poems and plays may perhaps seem somewhat notional, when the poems are in dramatic form and the plays are in blank verse. For me, however, the distinction is valid enough, though the nomenclature is a little confused; for, of course, to print a play in verse is to submit it to be read and judged like any other composi-

tion in verse. Nevertheless, dramatic poem and poetic drama proceeded from wholly different motives. The plays were written to be performed; they were written in verse because that is the medium proper to the kind of drama they attempt; they were written in blank verse because nothing else can combine so effectively the flexibility of speech-rhythm with the formality of metrical pattern. Against the opinion, which I believe exists, that to write a play in verse is thereby to render it unstageworthy, I would maintain that, equally on the stage as in print, the chief function of the dialogue is to be, not imitative, but expressive; and language finds its most expressive use in poetry, for which the natural rhythm is metrical. That, at any rate, was the motive from which these plays proceeded; it is not to the point that their success on the stage has, in fact, been of a very modest order.

But the poems in dramatic form were not written as a sort of compensation for failure to make poetic conquest of the stage. Historically, no doubt, the dramatic poem derives from the stage-play; but the form has been for centuries as independent of the actor as the epic of the rhapsodist or the lyric of the musician. Ever since Plato, indeed, the advantages of dramatic form in literature have been sufficiently evident; and poetry has as much right to use them as prose. The Romantic Movement vindicated that right, one would think, beyond question; and yet the dramatic poem is still sometimes spoken of as a bastard sort of composition. But the argument which would make it so would equally bastardize all other forms of literary composition. I have come to think, however, that, if it is legitimate to use dramatic form for purposes wholly independent of its origin, some substitute should be found for

the now useless convention of acts and scenes and stage-directions. Hardy's magnificent prose in *The Dynasts* completely transformed that convention; Darley in *The May Queen* suggested a charming way of circumventing it. My experiment has been, in some of the *Idyls*, to give the dialogue a narrative setting: a device which, after all, is as old as Theocritus.

The poems and plays are reprinted almost without alteration. This does not indicate any complacency on my part; it merely indicates a very positive conviction that they must take their chance as they were written, under the impulse in which they originated. Who can see their faults better than I can? But even if I could correct their faults, it would almost certainly be by introducing something worse—disharmony of mood and spirit.

L. A.

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POEMS

SOUL AND BODY

Body

ART thou for breaking faith, after these years,
These many married years
Wherein we have ourselves so well delighted?
Why art thou sick? Art thou beginning fears
That our dear joys have been unholy things?
Trust me, since we have been so long plighted,—
Whate'er be this white worship thou dost mean
To reach on these unlucky wings,—
Thou wilt miss the wonder I have made for thee
Of this dear world with my fashioning senses,
The blue, the fragrance, the singing, and the green.
And thou wilt find, not having me,
Crippled thy high powers, gone to doubt
Thy indignation and thy love, without
Help of my lust, and the anger of my blood,
And my tears.
Try me again; dost thou remember how we stood
And lookt upon the world exultingly?
What is for rapture better than these?—
Great places of grassy land, and all the air
One quiet, the sun taking golden ease
Upon an afternoon;
Tall hills that stand in weather-blinded trances
As if they heard, drawn upward and held there,
Some god's eternal tune;
I made them so, I with my fashioning senses
Made the devoted hills: have their great patiences
Not lent thee any health of ecstasy?
Or when the north came shouting to the beach,
Wind that would gag in his throat a lion's speech,
And spindrift with a whining hiss went by
Like swords.—wert thou not glad with me?

O who will lodge thee better than I have done
In exultation?—I who alone
Can wash thee in the sacring of moonlight,
Or send thee soaring even that above
Into the wise and unimaginable night,
The chambers of the holy fear,
Or bring thee to the breasts of love.

Soul

Dear Body, my loved friend, poor thanks have I
For all this service. As if fires had made me clean,
I come out of thy experience,
Thy blue, thy fragrance, thy singing, and thy green,
Passions of love, and most, that holy fear:
Well hast thou done to me with every sense.
But there's for me a fiercer kind
Of joy, that feels not, knows not, deaf and blind:
And these but led to it, that we did try
When we were person, thou and I;
Woe for me if I should dare
Partake in person now I see
The lights of unware ecstasy.
I must not in amazement stay,
Henceforth I am for a way
Beyond thy senses, beauty and fear,
Beyond wonder even.
I want neither earth nor heaven,
I will not have ken or desire,
But only joy higher and higher
Burning knowledge in its white fire,
Till I am no more aware
And no more saying 'I am I,'
But all is perfect ecstasy.

THE TRANCE

LORD GOD, I saw thee then; one mind, last night,
Met thee upon thy ways.
I was upon a hill, alone;
My drudgèd sense was aching in amaze:
Into my thought had too much gone
The inconceivable room of the blue night,—
The blue that seems so near to be
Appearance of divinity,—
And the continual stars.
I was afraid at so much permanence,
And was in trouble with vastness and fixt law.
All round about I saw
The law's unalterable fence,
And like forgery of shining bars
The stresses of the suns were there,
Keeping, in vastness prisoner,
My thought caged from infinity.
And then, suddenly,—
While perhaps twice my heart was dutiful
To send my blood upon its little race,—
I was exalted above surety
And out of time did fall.
As from a slander that did long distress,
A sudden justice vindicated me
From the customary wrong of Great and Small.
I stood outside the burning rims of place,
Outside that corner, consciousness.
Then was I not in the midst of thee,
Lord God?
A momentary gust
Of power, a swift dismay
Putting the infinite quiet to disarray,
A thing like anger or outbreaking lust,
A zeal immeasurably sent,—
So Law came and went,

And smote into a bright astonishment
Of stars the season of eternity,
And grazed the darkness into glowing lanes.
Swiftly that errand of God's vehemence,
The passion which was Law, slid by,
Carrying surge of creatures, fiery manes
Of matter and the worldly foam
And riddles of transgressing flame;
So the Law's kindled shakings came
A moment, and went utterly:
And seemed to be no more
Than if through the eternal corridor
Of emptiness should roam
A cry out of a fearful ecstasy.

CEREMONIAL ODE

INTENDED FOR A UNIVERSITY

I

WHEN from Eternity were separate
The curdled element
And gathered forces, and the world began,—
The Spirit that was shut and darkly blent
Within this being, did the whole distress
With blind desire after spaciousness.
Into this yearning, strictly bound by Fate
And closely natured, came like an open'd grate
At last the Mind of Man,
Letting the sky in, and a faculty
To light the cell with lost Eternity.

II

So commerce with the Infinite was regained:
For upward grew Man's ken,
Laying foundations deep in the ancient fen
Where other life helpless and prone remained.

With knowledge painfully quarried and hewn fair,
Platforms of lore, and many a hanging stair
Of strong imagination, Man has raised
His Wisdom like the watch-towers of a town;
    That he, though fastened down
By Fate, be with its cruelty not amazed,
But be of outer vastness greatly aware.

III

This, then, is yours: to build exultingly
    High, and yet more high,
The knowledgeable towers above base wars
And shameful surges reaching up to lay
Dishonouring hands upon your work and drag
Down from uprightness your desires, to lag
Among low places with a common gait;
That so Man's mind, not conquered by his clay,
    May sit above his fate,
Inhabiting the purpose of the stars,
And trade with his Eternity.

ALL LAST NIGHT

All last night I had quiet
In a fragrant dream and warm:
She had become my Sabbath,
  And round my neck, her arm.

I knew the warmth in my dreaming;
  The fragrance, I suppose,
Was her hair about me,
  Or else she wore a rose.

Her hair, I think; for likest
Woodruffe 'twas, when Spring
Loitering down wet woodways
Treads it sauntering.

No light, nor any speaking;
Fragrant only and warm.
Enough to know my lodging,
The white Sabbath of her arm.

DECEMBER 31ST

WHAT is he hammering there,
That devil swinking in Hell?
O, he forges a cunning New Year,
God knows he does it well.

Mill and harrow and rake,
A restless enginery
Of men and women to make
Cruelty, Harlotry.

HOPE AND DESPAIR

SAID God, 'You sisters, ere ye go
Down among men, my work to do,
I will on each a badge bestow:
Hope I love best, and gold for her,
Yet a silver glory for Despair,
For she is my angel too.'

Then like a queen, Despair
Put on the stars to wear.
But Hope took ears of corn, and round
Her temples in a wreath them bound.—
Which think ye lookt the more fair?

'ROSES CAN WOUND'

Roses can wound,
But not from having thorns they do most harm;
Often the night gives, starry-sheen or moon'd,
Deep in the soul alarm.
And it hath been within my heart like fear,
Girl, when you were near.

The mist of sense,
Wherein the soul goes shielded, can divide,
And she must cringe and be ashamed, and wince,
Nor in appearance hide
Of rose or girl from the blazing mastery
Of bared Eternity.

THE FEAR

As over muddy shores a dragon flock
Went, in an early age from ours discrete,
Before the grim race found oblivion meet;
And as Time harden'd into iron rock
That unclean mud, and into cliffs did lock
The story of those terrifying feet
With hookèd claws and wrinkled scale complete,
Till quarrying startles us with amaz'd shock:

So there was something wont to pass along
The plashy marge of early consciousness.
Now the quagmires are turned to pavement strong;
Those outer twilight regions bold I may
Explore,—yet still I shudder with distress
To find detested tracks of his old way.

INDIGNATION

AN ODE

I

THERE was an anger among men
In the old days; and it was as a sword
In the hands of the Spirit then
To hew the ambusht villainy out of his path
And in its thievish lurking kill the fraud.
And all the greeds of hell kept to their den
When the Spirit in his hands took wrath.
But lately, when there smiting should have been,
Who has a weapon seen?
The Spirit stands and looks on infamy,
And unashamed the faces of the pit
Snarl at their enemy,
Finding him wield no insupportable light
And no whirled edge of blaze to hit
Backward their impudence, and hammer them to flight;
Although ready is he,
Wearing the same righteous steel
Upon his limbs, helmed as he was then
When he made olden war;
Yet cannot now with foulness fiercely deal.
There is no indignation among men,
The Spirit has no scimetar.

II

Wilt thou not come again, thou godly sword,
Into the Spirit's hands?
That he may be a captain of the Lord
Again, and mow out of our lands
The crop of wicked men.
O thou forged anger, sword
Made of the holy rage
That went out against the old sick fen

Of being and on disorder warr'd
And fought it into fire and white stars,
When God made Heavens out of the unwholesome age
And maladies of existence, into good
Hunting all that liked not to be glad,—
In what armoury art thou now uplaid,
  And is the rust upon thy blade?
These many years unhelpt has stood
The Spirit, weaponless against bad,
Having no sharpness and no heat
Of indignation wherewith to meet
And battle with the vile banners, his great
Beleaguerment of fiends. But to his hands
  Come thou and clear our lands.
Let him exult to feel the weight
Of wrath swinging with his arm abroad,
And the air about him burn'd with a sword.
Let there be fire, and the anger of the Lord.

III

The Mind of Man has been a sacred place,
  And into it the evil race
Would trespass warily, much afraid
Of sorely-felt assaults upon them made
  By statures of great wind that came
  Terribly using a huge flame
    Intolerably white.
But now that wrath comes never out to fight,
The fiendish bands go lording in the day
And openly possess the mind of man.
With meaningless scurries of their insane feet
  They have rutted the helpless ground
  Like baggage-travell'd clay.
And when the climate of man's thought they found
Blue air, a road for immortal lights,—
Days like the house of God, and hosted nights

Held by the champions of eternity,—
With evil fires the swarms began
To make a weather they could understand
Of yellow dusk and smoky enormous bale
To grieve over the land
And make the sunlight fail.
Till a low roof of dirty storm they brought
To hang upon the mind of man:
Who cannot see that man's huge thought
Is now a dark calamity?

IV

But how long shall the Spirit see
The Life of Man, wherein with such delight
He walkt his glebe, and in his ways would sing
To do his pleasant gardening,
How long see his own especial ground
Vext in a season of disastrous blight,
Trampled and staled and trodden filthily
By troops of insolence, the beasts of hell?
But the Spirit now is built up narrowly,
And kept within a shameful pound,
Walled in with folly and stupid greed
Lest he should come to plead
Against our ugly wickedness,
Against our wanton dealing of distress,
The forced defilement of humanity,
The foundries and the furnaces
That straddle over the human place.
Nothing comes to rebuke us for
The hearts we wound with laws grievously,
The souls our commerce clutches
Cunningly into inescapable lime,
Embruted in wicked streets, made debase
In villainous alleys and foul hutches,
There trapt in vice and crime,

And for the wrong we did, who made them poor,
Set to pay infamous penalties in jails;
Not even for this the Spirit breaks his pales.
And shall there be no end to life's expense
In mills and yards and factories,
  With no more recompense
Than sleep in warrens and low styes,
  And undelighted food?
Shall still our ravenous and unhandsome mood
Make men poor and keep them poor?—
Either to starve or work in deadly shops
  Where the damn'd wisdom of the wheels
Fearfully fascinates men's wit and steals,
With privy embezzlement that never stops,
The worker's conscience into their spinning roar,—
  Until men are the dead stuff there,
  And the engines are aware?
Shall we not think of Beauty any more
  In our activities?
Or do no better than to God complain?—
I would that to the world would come again
That indignation, that anger of the Lord,
  Which once was known among us men.
  For terrible and upright then
The Spirit would stand suddenly out of his ways
  Of crouching grief and tears,
As by a hilt handling the wrathful blaze,
  Having again a sword.
And he would ruin all the mischievous walls
That had been raised up of materials
  Darkly quarried in hell, to hedge
And fence him out of the life of man;
But he with anger's shining edge
Would mightily cut the built iniquities,
Commerce, and all the policies
Of ownership and avarice;
And they would buckle at his stroke,

Perishing into flights of smoke.
Then he with a dreadful song, a sound
To put a howling fear in the bad horde,
Would step again on his own ground,
  He and his indignant sword,
And the golden havoc would begin.
Those foul ghosts encampt in man
Would run from the stabbing light of his blade.
Caught in the anger's burning wheel,
The huge scything of the tempered zeal,
This clumsy unlit shed we have made,
Money, to house our being in,
Would travel like a wind-blown thing.
In that fanning as motes would be,
The sword-thresht fabric of our trade,
Our happy greed, our healthy wrong,
Our villainous prosperity.
And ript out of its cursèd rind
Of laidly duties, that did wring
And clamp in ignominy man's whole mind,
This iron scurf of labour torn away,
Thought would walk again like a sacred king
The shining space of immortality.
  O for that anger in the hands
  Of Spirit! To us, O righteous sword,
    Come thou and clear our lands,
O fire, O indignation of the Lord!

INSCRIPTIONS

I

(*for the Roll of Honour of the University of Liverpool*)

THESE, who desired to live, went out to death;
Dark underground their golden youth is lying.
We live; and there is brightness in our breath
They could not know—the splendour of their dying.

II

(*for the first Anniversary of the Armistice*)

Mountains and stars, clouds and the white sea-foam,
Flames, snows, and children—should not these suffice,
But this heart-breaking loveliness must come
Gleaming through all—life that willingly dies?

III

(*for the War Memorial of the Liverpool Post Office*)

They died for us: they left this blessed fortune of the light,
And gave themselves to darkness, to our love returning never.
But lo, presiding over us like stars over the night,
Quiet and lovely and supreme, lives their death for ever.

R. B.

BEAUTIFUL life! As air delights to find
The white heat of a fire and to be flame,
The eager world throng'd into his glowing mind
And flame of burning beauty there became.

All things were turned to fire in him, and cast
The light of their transfiguring round his ways.
His secret gleamed upon us; where he past
He shone; he brought with him a golden place.

It was the purest fire of life that shone,
This angel brightness visiting our mould.
Life knew no way to make life lovelier, none;
But then came Death: 'I know the way.
Behold!'

WHITE LOVE

(OUT OF SIDI HAMMO)

SOME day a white feast I will hold,
When I am white through being old,
And over my soul have built a height
Of speculation marble white,
Towering holiness, and bright prayer;
Whereunder I at last shall dare
To entertain all secretly
My desire; yea, there shall be
Goblets white as that body of thine,
And white as thy spirit shall be the wine.

THE NIGHTINGALE

(FROM THE OLD ENGLISH RIDDLE)

I THROUGH my throat the thronging melodies
Delicately devising in divers moods,
Let my little breath lavishly chime,
Still the bestower of unstinted song.
Of old to all men my evening enchantment
Brings blissful ease; they, when I bind them
With my thrilling sweet troubles, enthralled in their houses
Lean forward, listening. Learn now my name
Who cry so keenly, such quivering glee
Pealing merrily, and pour such musical
Ringing welcome to returning warriors.

THE STREAM'S SONG

MAKE way, make way,
You thwarting stones;
Room for my play,
Serious ones.

Do you not fear,
O rocks and boulders,
To feel my laughter
On your grave shoulders?

Do you not know
My joy at length
Will all wear out
Your solemn strength?

You will not for ever
Cumber my play;
With joy and a song
I clear my way.

Your faith of rock
Shall yield to me,
And be carried away
By the song of my glee.

Crumble, crumble,
Voiceless things;
No faith can last
That never sings.

For the last hour
To joy belongs;
The steadfast perish,
But not the songs.

Yet for a while
Thwart me, O boulders;
I need for laughter
Your serious shoulders.

And when my singing
Has razed you quite,
I shall have lost
Half my delight.

ELIZABETH'S SONG

SHINING white clouds in the cherry trees tangled,
And over the orchard snowing;
Silver wild cherries on the hill-side spangled,
And bright among bronze oaks blowing:
So white, so bright, so fragrantly
Heart's delight blossoms in me.

Swallows come back to their endless careering
In love and in finest feather;
Swerving down, close to the cowslips nearing,
Then high in the golden weather:
In air so bright, with such a flight,
Dances on wings my heart's delight.

EPITAPH

SIR, you should notice me: I am the Man;
I am Good Fortune: I am satisfied.
All I desired, more than I could desire,
I have: everything has gone right with me.
Life was a hiding-place that played me false;
I croucht ashamed, and still was seen and scorned:
But now I am not seen. I was a fool,
And now I know what wisdom dare not know:
For I know Nothing. I was a slave, and now
I have ungoverned freedom and the wealth
That cannot be conceived: for I have Nothing.
I lookt for beauty and I longed for rest,
And now I have perfection: nay, I am
Perfection: I am Nothing, I am dead.

INTERLUDES

TO
CATHERINE

THE NEW GOD: A MIRACLE

PERSONS

MARGARET, a Princess, turned Christian.
A PRINCE, suitor for Margaret } Heathen.
THE KING }
PLACE: In Paynim, on the extreme coasts of the world.

Margaret's Room

MARGARET [*alone, singing to her harp*].

Too soothe and mild your lowland airs
For one whose hope is gone:
I'm thinking of a little tarn,
Brown, very lone.

Would now the tall swift mists could lay
Their wet grasp on my hair,
And the great natures of the hills
Round me friendly were.

In vain!—For taking hills your plains
Have spoilt my soul, I think;
But would my feet were going down
Towards the brown tarn's brink.

Is this a sin? Sure no one but my heart
Can tell the truth of my longing for the tarn.
Best pray again, perhaps; I am tired of prayer.

[*The Prince comes in.*

MARGARET. You!—
Why are you in my privacy?
PRINCE. Sweet, pardon;
Your father gave me leave to you.
MARGARET. He has
Invented a new plague then, you?

PRINCE. He knows
I love you——
MARGARET. And he looks to work your love
Upon my soul tormenting, as he swears
To work his wheels and pincers on my flesh?
PRINCE. The fierce old man your father spake me then,
Not sweet maid Margaret. Why are you grown
Unkind to love? I come to take you hence.
Soon as I heard the King to this sad isle
Had forced you, hastily and alone I followed.
O, I will never use horse so again!
And I was wondering, all the time I rode,
How I could bear to cripple him, my best.
But there was nothing in mine ears but wings
Of a buzzing fear, and I was stung in the soul
Poisonously by a breese, infecting me
To fever with its fed offal,—noisome talk,
Rank common news of you,—dear Heaven, of you!
Of your new faith, and of your dungeoning here,
Your father's loathing; but the worst was, none
For certain knew whether the shivering death,
The only thing alive in these rotten fens,
Had laid his nasty hand on you. But now
You'll come with me out of this misery.
Nature lies down a lazar here; the air
Is rank with her disease, and the brass sun
Cannot be virtuous to the sodden land.
All day there is no little noise of life,
The green is only wickedness of a fester.
You are of the hills: will you not see how wrong
To give such a life as yours to the waste swamp?
MARGARET. What help for me? Is not this my father's house?
PRINCE. Yes, and an ill one! As I took the broken causey,—
That seemed a mouldering spine across the marsh,
An old thrawn death, unsepulchred, of a dragon,—
In the half-light the low unshapen heap
Lookt like a sleeping effet in his form

Among the lifeless bogs, hating the world,
Immemorially alone,—the son, I thought,
Of these green bones I tread on; a dull sea moaned
Along the mudflats, as he yearned in dreams
To be less loathly. These earth-builded walls
Keep not the evening fogs out, but they crawl
Through crevices and dim the candle flames,
And hang like aguish dreams about your bed.
O, are you shivering? Am I too late?
Come back with me to the salt sunny sands,
The upland winds, the rains, and valley mists,
And pines.

MARGARET. You could have moved me once.

PRINCE. Not now?
Did that wild wizard whom your father killed,
Who taught you how to make his love turn hate,
That Christian whose loose lore is so unkind,
Teach you to hate the earth,—larch-woods when spring
Flings on them sudden green, and the high heaven
Is blue behind?—or plough-fields when the share
Turns the good-smelling soil? or apple-orchards?
Or to hate love?

MARGARET. Yes, to hate love and lovers.
But not the earth, I think. And sometimes longing
Will come upon me for the open air,
For sunbeams which no rotting vapours swarm,
For starry nights;—grey statures here of fog,
With held-up arms, guesst by the waving sleeve,
Stalk round the house all night, whose monstrous breathing
Kills those weak-flamed lamps. Often the quags
Call with a doleful voice, or shake as though
Somewhat beneath them stirred.—But you, if all
Who ought to love me hate, why do you love?

PRINCE. Have you no mirror?

MARGARET. Alas, is it that?

PRINCE. Come with me now! Into the hills!

MARGARET. The hills!

(I thank thee, God!)—No, friend, and no. But you,
Get you among the upland health of our hills,
That lift above the surface of earth's sound,
Where the stream's trouble seems a kind of quiet,
And news of lowland life break up on the cliffs,
Sheer rampired down to the meads, to nothing more
Than spray of noise, so thin,—the valley's mowing,
Sheep-washing, a white stir, sound weaker there
Than when a breeze, like a spent bird, his wings
Shuts, and settles upon the whinberries
And ligs there, a caress. And take this with you—
I love you not, and I loathe having loved.
Now go, and quickly. Why does he not go?

PRINCE. Will you not hear my sorrow first?

MARGARET. I know it,—
Love, and love forsworn, and love unquit,
And love again.

PRINCE. Ay, there is that for me,
But therewithal another and a greater.

MARGARET. Greater?

PRINCE. Lend me your harp. Have you forgot,
Margaret, how pleasantly we spent our love?

MARGARET. I pray you not remember it.

PRINCE. This only.
We had a charm against the common life,
That—as a pedlar weary with the road,
Eyes daft with the long whiteness, all adust,
And with his pack quite overdone, may meet
Golden delight, the fragrance of the gorse,
And cheat his thirst,—made glamour be about us,
Tales of the Gods on earth. And gladly you
Then listened, when I, telling of the Gods,
With speaking mixt with harp-playing contrived
Pleasure for you.

MARGARET. It was a sin in me.

PRINCE. But hear a last tale of the Gods we loved.
'Twill falter and be wayward; for my thought

Is set amid new matters where I go
Starless and fooled; as if on a mountain side
Mist took away the light, and the ground began
To live beneath my feet and writhe, and boulders
Knew how to move, and with a soundless gait
Walkt hulking through the gloom. So shall I be
In this tale of the ending of the Gods:
Yet hear me through. It is of you besides.

[*He takes the harp, and speaks upon his playing of it, looking to Margaret.*

I saw you first in the wet primrose-month;
With thin white dress and yellow clinging hair,
You seemed to move through the warm drenching rain
A cloud slid out of the dawn to roam the hills,
Forgetting to melt its fleece to shower-drops,
Still wearing sun it caught an hour agone.
Gods! that was a maid ye might have loved
When you were young-limb'd;—then, for now no more,
I think, for you is pour'd deathless liquor
When, crowned with festival, the brotherhood
Of Gods carouses, and Fate bears the wine
Till in each beaker brimming with red darkness
Coils and shakes a spirit of golden light,
Immortal youth, caught from an early sun.
(Down on to earth the fragrance of the spilth
Stoopt, and as fire takes hold upon the silver,
Youth of the Gods did take that early world,
And the air tasted of Heaven's holiday.)
But the slave Fate who serves Gods, hating them,
Visited the lean Hours in that cave
Where the Gods kept them mewed, brewing of Time,
And found them huddled to their witch-work, bought
Their service, promising they should pour out all
The mischief in their urns of bitter years
Upon the innocent world. From them he fetched
Skill'd poison, phial'd cunning, wise disaster,
Stronger than kind of Gods, and with this stew

Hemlockt the wine of Heaven, gave them drink
Age unawares, managing all their nerves,
Unfitting for rule. Out of their blue halls,
Out of the morning and the roofless air,
Out of their ample kingship, they must slink
Into a burial dark and shameful, far
From the sun's mastery, and the stare of day,
Thickets of stars, and windy plains of sky,
Where slope space reaches the lower lifelessness;
Deep overwhelmed in some deaf pond of dull
Inactive element, that stagnates close
Against the old and still uncleaned disorder,
Where the thick cold and slime of ungenerate dark
Glues up immortal sense and ken divine;
Often their drownèd agony shall heave
Large sobs from under, till the shoulder'd pit
Plunges, the blind cumber of the useless mire;
Unpitied doom; there shall no sight win through
The blear confusion of that clime to find
Their deathless dying, nor trust in them, men's prayers,
Come to their low disease,—without a heed
In that forgetful delf swallow'd. Only,
When with a golden footing on the seas
Summer goes forth, and tranced waves follow her,
Talking their wide blue meanings at her heels
Murmurous, or lift white kisses to her ankles,
Now for the morning fisher-fleet that rows
To take the freak-backt mackerel, an acre
Threshing with plenty, silver'd with playing sides,
It shall not be for ease amid the toil
Of oars and seine to join in the old round,
Lifting their thoughts to the unlabour'd ones:
'Sing, brothers, sing: for in the middle bay
The gannet stoop upon the silly crew;
Behind the shoal the leaping porpoise prey,
And we shall hawl a many fish to-day;
But this large weather the Gods share with you:

Be happy, for the good Gods are happy too.'
Not June, but the black nether winter is
Henceforward the Gods' long season. Spring,
The same young mad amazement, shall begin;
But there will be a want in Aprils now,
And when the neighbours greet, it is not thus:
'Are not the Gods down here to-day? You know
There is no greenness up in Heaven, they say.
But it is best, these days, even if one
Have the dawn for a place, and the winds for roads,
To be afoot on grass. And I dare swear
The cuckoo-flower down in my water-meadow
Has made a test of whiteness for the side
(In Heaven unquestion'd) of a goddess young.
And see the light upon the cowslip-brede?
One of our worships hath his deity
Put off there, for that beauty seemed enough
Endowment for one being; what makes a god
They have, the flowers; he'll take it back ere noon;
Meantime, 'tis in my field. Ay, all the herb
Is fresh from the treading of some holiness.'
But no such visitings now; and we shall know
Dimly 'tis ill with the Gods. Yea, though the hutch
And stifle of their piteous school lies where
Our day shows but a little cloudy wheel,
Their grief shall come between the sun and earth,
A hint of shame dissolved in the golden light.
And soon our prayers, into the yards of Heaven
And awning-coolth that flatters o'er them coming
With reverences ready, are taken there
In desolateness, come whimpering back to us,
Unentertained; for no blithe speech of the Gods
Heard they along the passages of Heaven.
And if some, bold with the much need they carry,
Search and cry for the Gods, they'll find them fought
With sickness, held down as if knelt upon,
Over their beauty hateful pain written

Slandering,—ay, that beauty which aloft
Crowned the world's beauty striving up like fire
Away from coals and dross, till in the Gods
To pure flame won, golden, not mixt with time:
That beauty killed and turned to dingy tarnish.
Whose were the arms that late managed the sun,
The hands that could have jarred the starry gear?
The Gods'? but soon they'll have too weak a scope
To daunt the plagues sordid like flies about them.
Destiny is an older thing than Gods:
When that blind power abhors them, they are naught.
So now; and from her house in the night she has
Let loose the living storms there denn'd, uncaged
The wings of blights, unstabled pests of demons,
Enlarged new spawn from out the breeding deep,
All to harm the good Gods. See you not now,
Watcher on Heaven's tower, dun afar off
Strange horrible weather smoking into the light,
The muster of her swarms? 'Tis she has sent
A siege to Heaven, vext already and scared:
Flights of insolence, pester of wild ghosts,
Tongue-still'd over the walls with moony stare
To gnarl upon the session of blencht Gods,
Ring their fear with a hedge of gleeful faces,
Mocking silently. This is for Heaven; but earth
Has too their practice, as that some in flesh
Must sheathe the broad destruction of their vans,
Fold up the hovering of fledge iron noise,
Case their claw'd hatred smoothly, lodge in souls
Human their purposes. And one, the worst
Whelpt in the cellars of destiny's lone house,
Chose this slim beauty, wherein our quick Truth
More native than in sunlight seemed, this girl
As shed for his rough horror. Who dare think
Her voice now does to cover a fiend's bleating?—
That body which I love so well is now
An inn of villainy for Gods and men?

Ah, Gods! Last year perhaps a certain scorn
Took you, when leaning o'er men's business
Down from your builded privacy. How blame
The poor deluded Gods, so wholly at ease?
But now there is a labour and a sweat,
Panting, despair, ready for you,—a hunt
Now straining at you, soon to be unleasht,
Gaped throats, fangs unlipt, many-footed fear.
Here 's one will clap her hands, here 's one will laugh
At that day's sport, when from the opened gloom—
The low, slough-moated mews of natures bad—
Out of their famine leaping come Fate's dogs
To pull down Gods in the white day; for still
Some keen permitted Evil o'ertakes Good.
The kennelled Evil howls and hungers long,
But Good at last is thrown among the jaws
As carrion to be scavenged up by Evil,
And the wincing air (so rumour'd of that greed)
Peals to beast-laughter. Here 's one will laugh with Evil.
Ah, but my heart, my heart, is it so well?—
These hides, mudded from lairs in the bottom-world,
Pitching a tented doom round Heaven town
Of wicked reek, that throws, so wide it is,
A tawny malady on the white streets?—
These swift clemm'd curses having leave to hound
Divinity?—they all enlargement get,
But cover is the thing for Gods, to whom
All question is the day, unanswerable.
Which of them ever thought to have a need
Of Death?—the famous frequent roads he hath made
Downwards, the gates that shut out noise,—a jest
In Heaven. 'Not for us,' they said; and still
The darkness Death has built around his rest
Is nowhere hinged for them, and the main roads,
So straight and easy trodden of us men,
Slide from the feet of Gods, bewilderment;
No alley goes to refuge from the mouths;

Only for them is shelter in the wide
Flat unseen marches of nonentity,
The unmeasured place, where Wisdom never comes,
And Power sickens, failure, and all unhealth;
To lodge with half-made things, forgotten stuff
That should be dead but lives unkind, crude fleshes
Unkneaded into form, or if in form,
Infamous, ribaldries of the Power that makes.
They are among the vermin, none so worthless
As these new sins, the Gods; themselves unchanged,
But that unsensed outer Mood, beyond
This round of causèd things (yet all within
As air is in the flame), changed. The event
Of its Existence flows away from them,
A tide pouring into new Law, and they
Are left behind, shipwreckt in the dark,
Sunder'd from any voice of the living waters,
Deserted by their holiness, sifted out,
Drained off like lees, they who once were Heaven,
Become suddenly bad and the waste of the world,
Given to the unspeakable murder of old hell.
And nevermore their hair shall feel the stir
Of fellowly winds, nor see they blue again.
  But Fate, enfranchis'd from the Gods' good rule,
Now gets to work. Now what the Gods would make
Of Man shatters, the subtle singleness,
The new rare thing their skill, spanning all life,
Had sometimes won from its diverseness, as we
From many wires a tune; and though Man stopt,
In divine memories had linger'd on
That wonder of humanity, at last
A just psaltery, toucht into a song.
Fate with malicious fingers breaks the intent,
And 'tis enough for him if the poor ado
(So close to the dirt now) of life's multitude
Make him a foolish, cruel, useless game.
  Destiny made all bad, ugly: the Gods

Came, and with craft fashion'd her thought to good,
Earth and men's minds; they go, these Gods, and all
Slips back to its old rankness, earth and men's minds.
And does this gladden Margaret?—she whose eyes,
As open pools, in the grey hour before
Morning, expect the day and wait, assured,
To have their patient ken fill'd up with blue—
Waited for wonder and the fearful joy
When she should meet One at a riding's turn
Long known in worship darkly, while the green wood,
Sacred of Him like burning, thrilled and glowed
A temple of emerald flame around.—But then,
That curst old man, that Christian!

[*He drops the harp.*

Ah, Margaret,
Although your use is to turn mankind from gods,
I yet must love you. Ay, now I see you here
Pale, slender, hunger-eyed, in this mean room,—
Ah, what hath blent the morning in your eyes?—
My love is fiercer grown. Come to me, love!
Although you hate my gods, remember love.

MARGARET. Remember love? Ah, but when I left you
There was something rended in my breast, that still
Aches,—as you know a wound that has catcht cold
Will keep all nerves astretch upon sense, quivering
In subtle shifting harmonies of pain.
So that rude snatch did play upon my heart-strings,
And still they tremble to the same dull tune,
And still the same loud pain is going through me.
But yet I may not hate my grief. They say
God loves a soul all anguish.

PRINCE. Does he so?
Loves he mine then, think you?—and belike
When he has gotten lordship wide enough
He'll make the world all anguish, and then love it?
Is it a good thing to be loved by him?
And when he has finisht hunting our poor Gods,

And when his hounds, his pack of merciless Hours,
Have got them down, he'll love them in their pain?
This is a god to worship, who loves anguish!

MARGARET. Why do you stay here?

PRINCE. I must have your love.
I will not take your mild unheartfelt No.
There is an insane thing struggling in me,—
I know it not, but it is stronger than I.

MARGARET. There 's many more will love you, for you are
(Forgive me, God!) most beautiful. For me,
I have a lover—but you would not understand.
Enough I cannot love you. Go, beseech you.

PRINCE. What is this smoke that in the moonlight swims,
So hampering the air with pleasantness?
Its silvered fragrance fills the room.

MARGARET. My prayers
Just ended. Incense my master gave me,
And bad me use it of an evening so.

PRINCE. O maidenly cunning! 'tis some lusty herb
You burnt. What 's this it 's doing to my love?
You knew it maddened like this?—

MARGARET. What? Leave me.

PRINCE. Aha, I see. Indeed I lackt in this.
My love was clean; you'ld have it luxury?
'Twas done, was it not, lest I should be too slow?
Your coy denials are to prick it on?
If this is of your master's teaching, sure
He had some knowledge beside of heavenly things.
What, you do mean mere lewdness?—
Well, I am changed. Come, yield thee, then.

MARGARET. Go, Prince,
Before I curse thee for thy beastly words.

PRINCE. Come, girl, enough. You see I take your wish.
I'll do it, and then loathe you for 't. Or—go?
Ay, to the dark old King. This matter is,
I see, for him to know. For as we talkt
I somehow felt there was a thing kept hid

Behind his mannerly speech. And suddenly
It tare the curtain of his sorrowful words,
The unkind inhabitant of his nature, lookt
Into mine eyes impudent, ay, and gleeful,
As if it had found a means for its device.
And, as the hag is like the maid, a face
Burnt in the joys of fiendish clips, that crime
Was like what once was love for you. In truth
The horror I saw sitting in his mind
Then quite o'er-came my wit to grasp, for I
Never before had seen a father's hate,
And knew it not. Now its intent I see,
This,—you have skilfully cheated him you make
Much of your chastity: therefore most glad
Were he if you dishonoured were. But now,
It seems you are not quite so nice as he
Reckoned. The shame he would have forced on you
You have already wreakt upon yourself.
And yet perhaps I do him wrong. I am
Dismayed, my reason thrown, shamefully caught
In your fine wickedness, wilily noosed and lasht,
And the wise doors he kept outrage behind
(The squinting lechery of snouts and manes)
To starve, and put crazed faces to the grids,
Set wide; and jails of filthy-gesturing thoughts
Go loud through my brain, speaking tongues of hell;
As you would have them, setting me on to do
Beastliness. Wait you here. I fetch the King.
To him look innocent of your hopes.

MARGARET [*kneels*]. No!
Fetch not my father here! Is this your love?

PRINCE. Whether 'tis love or hatred now I know not,
What care you? Lust is the thing for you. [*He goes.*

MARGARET. Hear me, O God.
I have been lesson'd all imperfectly
In thy saint knowledge; for they killed the man,
Horribly killed the weak old man who brought

News of thee here, ere he could kindly lead
My limping wit into thy council-place.
All I have learnt of thee is, I am thine
(My father hates me for it). Art thou not mine?
Strangely thou doest all thy purposes,
Little the mention I have heard of thee;
But is it not mislikely for thy weal
That I have beauty?
When I was heathen, I thought it good; but now
Take it from me, O God! Send now thy power here,
Or surely thou and I be sorely used.
In all this place we twain are quite alone,
And many are against us. Well for us
It were, if thou couldst make me laidly now.
Is it not easy for thee to spoil thy work?—
Sluice on my beauty shame, and ugly scalds;
Or change me altogether, turn this body
Into a strangeness, make me mixture, laughter,—
But pardon this wild talk; I am unhinged.
Pardon that then fear jumpt upon my will
And rode it down, so that I cringed my knees
That once I sware only to thee should crook.
Only in this thing have me in thy heed,
Undo the strictness which the slow-skill'd years
Use in their duty, and all harms they have
Set by for me, now and at once unloose
Banded upon me, confusing this young flesh,
Unsettling from its many keeps my beauty.
Am I not loved enough for this? O then
I'ld have thee wroth, so thou bruise out my beauty.
Ay me, I fear—O God, I loved him once—
O swift, swift, my part done, thine yet remains;
Do some horrour upon me, send some worm
Of eager malady to crawl my skin
Tracking, or blow uncleanness on it, of sores
Or vile obliterating rash, furfair
Stiff in a stark mask. Hear me, O God!

GOD *speaks*

I hear thee.

MARGARET. Is it God
Speaks words strangely into me, larger than aught
My knowledge took before, and without sound?

GOD. I have been listening all this while, my friend.

MARGARET. Give me some other shape, that to this prince
I be not lewdness nor a drunkenness
Making him brutishly insult on thee.
I would no longer be thus dangerous,
Thus beautiful.

GOD. Simple this prayer is, smelling sweet to me,
Therefore I take it and begin my power.
Yea, I will largely let thee out of here,
Of being beautiful, otherwise tiring thee.
Thou shalt appear as God, and the glory of God.
These two, when they shall look upon thy form,
Shall be alone when I unmake the world.
The appearance of the earth shall fail to them,
And the great sides of the world flinch and crack open,
Spilling my glory out of its splitten hidings:
I now put off the nature of the world.
For long enough have I been matter, speed
And business of forces, place and time,
The roomy play of motes through the wide stress
Of fine tense ether, building minds and worlds.
But suddenly the whole kind of things appears
Like scale upon the molten Real, soon
Riving apieces, running, all unfixt,
Out of dimension into God. And this
Eternity, scattered with starry troubles,
Becomes a firth of glory, till again
I am a deed, a strength wielding stuff,
And out of the tide lifteth another shore.
So shalt thou look; for I will lend thee all
My latter anger. Then the orderly stars

Shall be a tumult of small crass, a scurf
Worn for an instant by the fire divine;
And all the many powers of the world
A spray like smoke driven before my face.
God, when all the multitudinous flow
Of Being sets backward to him; God, when He
Is only Glory, is before these two;
And nowhere is there aught but God and these.
They are not safe. When no identity
Can be outside my state; when mind, nor sun,
Nor commonalty of suns, nor oldest fate,
But disarrangeth, mixing into Me;
Loose as a flame all fastened surety;
They are not separate: their confinèd selfs
Shall burst their bands and squander into naught;
For all untimely here these two shall come
Alone into the doom, the present God.

THE PRINCE [*without*]. Now, thou innocent foxery, weeping, art thou?
Take heart, I am not gone;
But since thy wish is so, (for the sorrowing king
Tells me the naughty warlock taught thee lusts)
For thee I will be foul, and do a thing
Detestable to me yesterday.—Besides,
It is not Margaret, only a fiend
That wears her flesh. [*He comes in.*
This is strange here;
Can *I* exist as well as Holiness?
I?—I have forgotten what was '*I.*'
There is no more a thing that saith, *I* am;
There is nought to take my senses working.—Death,
I hope; I am abominable here. [*A pause.*

THE KING [*without*]. It should be done by now. I gave him drink
Metheglin spiced with hot infamous drugs.
I mingled in her foolish incense too
Powders that wake wild lust: the air is well

Infected,—yet he left her safe untoucht
The first time: now I think she is tamed indeed.—
Laughable was it how the wicked steam
Workt in his blood— [*He comes in.*
A spell! O that a craft,
Made of loose evils outside Nature, should
More excellent than Nature be.
The curst thing uses me as sun a vapour;—
Curse thee, and this almighty Hell leagued with thee.

BLIND

Two tramps: a Woman and her blind Son, a simply.

MOTHER. No further, child, to-night; your mother 's tired,
And your blind feet have stumbled more than once.
Here 's firing, a rare lot of withered gorse.
SON. Good: I think fire never puts such cheer
Into his flames as when he 's gorse to burn.
MOTHER. My soul, this is a sad way we are going;
I should be underground by rights, I think;
The woman 's dead in me these many years,
And it 's a cold thing to carry in your heart.
I'ld as lieve my flesh were trapt under this stone
As start again to-morrow the old gate;
But it would need to be a heavier one
To keep me still and smothered down, if death
Got me before I'd found my man. Ah well,
One more day nearer.—If my hate would learn
Patience! O, be satisfied, my disease,
You shall have better food than this old heart;
And drink not all my life, you lime-hot hate;
There 's a trough prepared somewhere against your thirst,
Brimming, and then lap your fill.—Here, my son,
Let me make sure again of your arms' strength:
Ay, these are proper cords; and there'll be need
To take him firmly when we find him, child.
Active he is and tall and beautiful
And a wild anger in him.—See here, boy,
My throat 's his throat; take it as you will his,
No, tighter, tighter, where 's your strength? Ah——
SON. O mother, did I hurt you?
MOTHER. Simple lad,
You weren't half cruel enough; you barely brought
The red flames into my eyes this time at all.
O but it 's good, the grip you have, and good

To feel it on me, try the pains of those
Who strangle; they will be *his* some day.
SON. Mother, don't let us have more of this game.
There 's something gets into my fingers, dear,
When I begin to press and feel you breathe
Difficultly: why will you make me hurt you?
MOTHER. Practice for you, and practice for my hate
To trust your grip. You know not what a peril
Your hands must deal with; doubts keep stinging me
Whether you have the sinews to make quiet
That danger of a man.—And he escapes us!
We go too halt. Yet there 's scant doubt he knows
We're after him; sure he is afraid
And sleeps not well of nights. Married too
Belike these twenty years,—curse her, the witch.
Son, am I mad? I wonder if I'm mad.
SON. They say so, mother. Now I've lit the fire,
What are we going to eat?
MOTHER. Yes, we must eat,
You to keep strength and I to keep my wits.
Something might hap to-morrow. I'll go beg
At doors, and if I fail (it 's darkening) steal.
SON. Ho, fire 's in a friendly mood to-night.
That gypsy woman said there was a league,
Didn't she, mother, between me and fire?
Hark at him purring when I stroke his ribs;
Does he not play to bite my hand? She said
His flames, if I sat and waved my hands for him,
Would follow and lick after them, and if
I raised them as to hit him, they would flinch.
Is it true, mother?—but I'm sure it 's true.
Mother, have we blind souls?
MOTHER. What is it to you
If you have soul or no? All you are for
Is, when the time comes, and I tell you grip him,
To get the life in his throat under your hands,
And use your thumbs.

SON. But is not soul a kind
Of hungriness? Because if so, I have some.
MOTHER. What good 's that to you? O the child you are.
I had a soul once; it was a poor thing
To this fierce master that now drives my flesh.
Who 's fed you all these years?
SON. You, mother.
MOTHER. Then
Love me for it, and burn up all your thought
To zeal like mine for this one deed of ours.
I fear you'll fail me.
SON. Mother, that 's not kind.
I know that some one must be killed by me,
And all my lifetime we've been looking for him.
When the time comes, here are my hands. It seems
A simple thing; and in my head there 's room
For much beside.
MOTHER. Who knows how lucky it is
That in your body grown to such a manhood
Your mind is still a child?—my poor blind child!
SON. Are you rested, mother? But it does not sound
Quite dark yet, so it 's no good, I suppose,
You going to the farmyards. Are you sure,
Mother, you'll know him?
MOTHER. I will know him, son,
Never you fret. There 's not his like in the world.
You mustn't let him speak though, for I fear
The sleeping habit of my tears.
SON. Let me alone for that. Give me his throat,
And slim the words must be to sliver past
The collar I'll have round it.
MOTHER [*to herself*]. Ah no, God, not like this. It must have been
Wicked to you, that long-dead love of mine,
That it bore so unkindly. Will you not now
Relent at last, and give my boy to hate?
It will be vile, if your delivering up

His father to these hands, so rare a man,
Be not thus changed from impiousness, nor made
Holy with a fierce righteousness of hate,
Him to divide from usage of his breath.
I know you have warned death from him, that his son,
The minting of his passion on the world,
A love he has forgotten, may be found
The mischief of his life, his own wild youth
Standing up formed against him, given hands
To pluck him out of going on in the light,
A wrong he did grown big to do him wrong.
Will you come so near justice, and yet miss?—
Can you not hate him, child? It must be you
Who do it, not merely I through you.—
Vain, this: there is no end to your father's guilt.
He it was maimed your sense and reason, to spoil
The rightness of this work. How is it right
That you should kill him when you hate him not?
Yet as it falls, so must it; for I think
My purpose will not now leave go my life;
I have it for a nature, and my law.
When you were born, it took me, and your growth
Delighted it, not me. There never was
Joy in a mother's heart at your great strength;
Those were no mother's thanks I gave to Heaven
That you were thewed so well, but a great praise
Because I knew God signed my vengeance with you.
Yet there is mother in me.—Ah, child, child,
How near my bitter suckling of you seems.
Often I lookt that you would cry to draw
The throbbing fire shut in my breasts; and yet
Always you took it as it had been milk.
But none the less I knew, sorrow and guilt
Were all I had to feed my innocent with.
The cruelest thing was, how you smiled at me
And never wept that I should give you drink
Unnatural lawless nourishment, despair.

Was it not harsh as brine to taste?—but you
Delighted in it and thrived, my poor blind babe.
You do not hear. What are you rapt upon?

SON. What, mother? O, that little girl we met
At midday I was thinking of. You know
She let me put my hands upon her head:
What a wonderful loveliness that is of hair,—
Soft, smooth, delicious as the smell of gorse
In sunlight, and for slipping through your fingers
Better than water. Hair—yes, it would be
A nature, I suppose, between sunshine
And water, and yet neither.—There must be
Words equal to the loveliness of hair;
If I could find them! Golden, do they say?
I wish the words for beauty had been made
By men who knew with hands, and not with eyes.
Why isn't your hair like that little girl's,
Mother? You mind when first my feeling knew
The moon was shining on me? Well, I took
That hair into my heart as wonderingly.
But it feels strange there: it 's as if it missed
A welcome that it should have found therein.
That 's why I askt, have we blind folks a soul?

MOTHER. O Lord, Lord, this is not surely he who must
Thy vengeance do and mine?

SON. The ugly beast,
What are her hands to mine? What right had she
To take the little one's hair out of my hands?
Beggar, says she, be off; how dare you lay
Your dirty mawlers on my darling's head?—
If hair was made for any hands, for mine.
The beast, I hate her.

MOTHER. Ay, can you hate her
Who took away your play, poor simpleton?
The work we have to do, that would be rare
For demons, will not move you half so much.
That frightens me. And it was your father did it!

SON. Mother, how close these trees are overhead;
Yet by their speech they are grown. Are they askew?
MOTHER. Ay, poor old trees, right thrawn they are. They know
The north-west winds demand a posture of them,
And fear the weight of wild feet on their necks
Spraining them, if they stood upright again.
They are grown used to stooping now, as I,
Pulled mainly awry by long-served fierce desire,
Have all my nature strained from rightness, fixt
Crooked and nailed there, bending under my lust.
I am old wood: there is no spring in me.
When this our murder no more burthenously
Rides on my shoulders, but, as I've bred it to,
Springs from its tired seat at him I loved
And fleshes there its greed, what will be then?
There is no blessed straightening for me.
What is there for me?
You life of mine, surely you will not stay
In this stale house, when your dear hate is gone
To sleep beside his doing, filled and content?
You'll lack the comfort of his company;
And the dim corners of the house will stir,
Rustling with unseen hauntings, that well know
You are in dark, now that his eyes are gone.
The best thing you can do then is, unlatch,
Go out of doors and wander, till you find
In some large quiet place the sleep you want.
Son, mind the fire. I'll go get some food. [*She leaves him.*
SON. She 's talkative to-night. I wonder what
This thing is that is in her? Some day, sure,
She'll have a harm from it, it shakes her so.
I wish we'ld come across that bad man soon
And get it over; she worsens every month.
Will she turn bitter against me, do you think,
If we're much longer meeting him? She'll craze,
I fear; and O it 's cold within me,
Thinking the time may come she will not love me.

Why, it seems only a few days gone by
Since she would mother me, without cause be kind;
No wearying of my talk then! But I think
All that was years ago. And what a way
Of walking now she 's taken to,—no songs,
No lagging, scarce a word; just padding on
As if we were escaping, or afraid.
All these are like the leaves, that change their voice
When a storm 's near an hour before it comes.
And if she turned against me——? O but I need,
Mother, your love. We can't be looking, looking,
All day and every day and still not find him;
And when we do, I'll make my part all right.
Why, I'm forgetting fire. What, are you mum?
Here; you can talk of gorse-rubbish, I know.—
I like this hour best of all the day:
The evening cool upon my skin, the dark
And stillness, like a wing's shelter bending down.
I've often thought, if I were tall enough
And reacht my hand up, I should touch the soft
Spread feathers of the resting flight of him
Who covers us with night, so near he seems
Stooping and holding shadow over us,
Roofing the air with wings. It 's plain to feel
Some large thing 's near, and being good to us.
But you it is, fire, who mainly make
This time my best. I love to be alone
Except for you, and have a talk with you.
What are you? There, I'm always asking that,
And never get but laughing flames for answer.
But I believe I've found you out at last.
You, fire, are the joy of things; there 's naught
Would stay in its own self, if it could find
How to be fire and joy. For you're the escape
From strictness and from nature laid on stuff
That once was freedom, still remembering it
Under its show of tameness; and there is

Nothing that is not waiting for a chance
Out of duty to slip, and give way madly
To the old desire it has in it of joy,
Standing up in a flame and telling aloud
That it is fire and no more a shape.
The wonder is, when here some leaves and furze
Have found the way to burn, the whole wide land
Leap not up in a wild glee of fire,
For all the earth 's a-tiptoe to join in.
Often I have to run and skip in a wind;
And then I seem to fill the space of the world,
So large in gladness. It 's the same thing as lets
Poor straw exult into a shouting blaze.
Hullo, here 's a man.

A Tramp comes in, with a fiddle.

TRAMP. Kind sirs, here 's virtue for you. Ha, that 's gorse
You're burning, ay, and ash. Sirs, I have here
The ware that is of most worth in the world,
A chance to be good; the wind was peddling it
And would not take less than my pride for it,
But 'tis to you free gift;—No, I'll not take
A penny for it: Yours, sir, yours, and welcome.
So let there be some cheer and fire to-night
For an old crazy blind bad vagabond.
Here 's pity come for you to entertain.
Ah, thank you for those kind words, good brother fire;
Your fellow seems a cautious man,—yet I'm
A rung in the ladder up to Heaven.—Look here,
Tongues lie, 'tis true. But see my witnesses
That never yet spake leasing. Stand you forth,
Sirs my trowsers, and testify, true souls,
You are the breeks of Need, the very wear
Of Pity and Ruth,—no, that 's wrong, Ruth 's a lady.
Honour my trowsers, mister. Why, old fire
Knew them at once, and gave them, honouring, warmth.
If any one might be proud it 's fire; for he

Has heard God speaking, and is sib to Hell.
A good-hearted fellow, fire, but blind; and some
Think blindness a poor lot—as it were, affliction;
It has crost my mind too. Well now, kind sirs,
Do you believe my trowsers? That my name
Is pity? (for no poor, no pity, you know.)
Why, this is strange: I took you to be men,
But by your speaking I perceive you all
Are whales and cameleopards. Pray forgive me,
Excellent necks, I reverence your neckships.

SON. Who are you?

TRAMP. Save us, one has got man's speech.
You had done better, Spots, to have left alone
This English; 'twill not help your browsings. But
Who am I?—Saint Francis bad me to his wedding,
Being the bride's godfather. There, the Wind
His brother and the Rain his sister took
Such a strong liking to me, I'll be hanged
If they will leave me. O a virtuous pair
No doubt; but she keeps crying down my neck
And he 's forever singing psalms, that now
They almost bore me, and—don't tell them, pray,—
I wish they were not quite such faithful friends.
But, who am I? Crazy I am and blind,
Who once had wits and seeing. But now words,
Words are all my comforts, words and brandy.
Thank God for words, the best things he has made.

SON. Blind am I, but better off than you:
I never saw.

TRAMP. What, blind?
Your hand; ay, sure, that 's a blind man's hand.

SON. First, old man, answer me. [*He pins him by the arms.*

TRAMP. Well, well,
There 's no call for gripping me like that.

SON. What colour are your eyes?

TRAMP. Blind, blind,
Blind as the weather.

SON. Was it you loved a girl——
TRAMP. No, no, it 's false. You've given ear to slander.
SON. I am glad. Not yet, not yet. Ah, I forgot,
He 's a tall seeing thewed man, not like this.
TRAMP. And I'm glad you've unclaw'd me. What a clutch!
Now, will I give you a tune?
SON. No.
TRAMP. Thank the Lord;
I needn't scratch my cursed fiddle to-night
For supper. I suppose you've got some supper?
Lie there, my art,
And a gouty devil quash you with his hoof,
Although it 's heart-strings I have stretched upon you
To squeak out bawdry, which will get me brandy,
And brandy makes the old words move again
Like a bronze-harnesst soldiery that goes
Sounding and sunlit, treading marble roads.
SON. Can you skill words?
TRAMP. Not I, but by the Lord
Words can skill me. They're a better drunkenness,
And put your sorrowing toes and unhappy heels
And reproachful hams farther outside the doors
Of sense, shut deaf to their clamouring of pains,
Than any quart of brandy.
SON. What are words?
TRAMP. God's love! Here 's a man after my own heart;
We must be brothers, lad. What, you're not one
Who thinks the soul a kind of chemistry,
And words a slag it hides its working in?
What are words? Come, I've the speech to-night; we'll talk.
In with you to my porch, and I will teach you
Serious things. Sit in my mystery,
And be wise. So first, learn we the world;
Then, climbing to more excellent knowledge, learn
How words are things out-marvelling the world.—
The world 's a flame of the unquenching fire,
An upward-rapturing unhindered flame,

Singing a golden praise that it can be,
One of the joys of God the eternal fire.
But than this soaring nature, this green flame,
Largely exulting, not knowing how to cringe,
God's joy, there are things even sacreder,
Words: they are messengers from out God's heart,
Intimate with him; through his deed they go,
This passion of him called the world, approving
All of fierce gladness in it, bidding leap
To a yet higher rapture ere it sink.
They have our souls for their glib travelling,
Our souls, part of the grain of the burning world.
And full of the very ardour out of God
Come words, lit with white fires, having past through
The fearful hearth in Heaven where, unmixt,
Unfed, the First Beauty terribly burns.
A great flame is the world, splendid and brave;
But words come carrying such a vehemence
Of Godhead, glowing so hot out of the holy kiln,
The place of fire whence the blaze of existence rose,
That dulled in brightness looks the world against them,
Even the radiant thought of man. There be
Who hold words made of thought. But as stars slide
Through air, so words, bright aliens, slide through thought,
Leaving a kindled way.

SON. Ah, this is dark.
I am not kind for them to travel through,
These glories, words. Is there smoke to the world,
As other flames have smoke? I'm that, belike.
But O the emptiness sometimes within me,
And I paining and striving after words
To ease my sorrowful dumb heart.—But you,
They'll come and go through you? Are they so fine?

TRAMP. Talk they of angels? Never was there saint
Heard mercy so soft spoken, felt such wise
Pitying forgiveness in his closed communion,
As I've had fear and loathing in my heart

Soothed into calm by mild blue-wearing words.
Terrors? destructions? But for crimson wings,
Garmented wrath, steel hammered and held for war,
And faces set against ruth—no rioting town
Prophet beheld shadowed by scathe of sword
Or rained upon by coals, elate thereat,
Had such a siege of seraphs awning it,
As I've had campt around me, without cause,
Beauty and terror liveried in words.
And I have known when that famed holiness,
That word seeming arrayed in cloth-of-silver,
Love, has suddenly turned so evil a thing,
Devils were fools in wickedness to it;
And holding my soul numb in its cold look
Has fascinated me to its own evil.
O boy, I've lived: my misery and blindness,
Ay, and the death that 's private in me now,
Were things for you to worship, could you but know
What service 'twas I got them in, a war
As old as Hell, still fighting.
Where 's this supper that you talkt about?
I'm thirsty with this rattling.

SON. To-day, now,
We met a little girl. My straying hands
Found out her head;—there went a thrill in me,
I'd opened a new way of being pleased,
Her hair. How I delighted all my feeling
With touch of that strange fineness on my skin!
But after, memory of that delight
Wanted to put on words. And I had none
For it to live in, and it ached in me.
Have you got words to cure the heart, when longing,
After there has been pleasure too much felt,
Is like a twisted stitch about it?

TRAMP. Come, you're the speechless world. Singers you have
Given you to interpret your own souls
To you, and put in tongueless mouths a song.

Here 's one. Now, World, thou shalt be satisfied.
Hot from my heart, made yesterday, is this;
A friend of mine was hanged, and I got drunk,
Whence this. Open your ears. Are you ready?
[*Twanging his fiddle-strings.*
Heaven, lay your harps aside, and let Hell speak a bit.
Ay, we all know you were good, and are good, safe in Heaven;
We hear you giving thanks therefor, but don't you think time is
That you thankt us for being bad, and trying out your holiness?
What 's good without temptation, and who could tempt but we, the bad?
How did you come there, O you good ones, if not by resisting evil?
Look at our pains barred over with gratings, and the throngs of your saviours,
Look, and be ashamed of your bliss: for your good we are here.
We netted your godly paths, and made torments for you;
We whipt you and rebuked you, for the Lord desired to see you
Practising faith and meekness, and deserving your reward.
And it is our doing, that you are free of Heaven.
Cunningly were we fashion'd, and put to a cunning use,
Made to delight in pestering you, and blindly pleasuring
To hound all those who could be good, not wise enough to know
We blest you with our cruelties, maimed so that we could not tell
You had our ignorant backs for stairs, leading you up into Heaven.
We thought that wickedness was best, not masters of our thought;
God had robbed us privately of the power and will to be good.
We had given us wolves' hearts, and the ruth of shrikes was in us,

Rats infecting cities with plague, and the swine that ate child's flesh.
And all that you unworthily might spend your pity and love.
We were the hates forgiven of you, the lecheries you withstood,
We did you the injuries and scorns you blest us for.
Bound we were in prison, and you came and loved us there,
Although you knew our hidden minds bitterly at work
To pay you back with harm, when we got out again.
We lay down with Evil, and fellowed him at meals,
And when we came for alms to you, told you that we loved
All good things, and you believed us, knowing that we lied.
You could not rest from good, for we were goads pricking you on;
The blossom of your holiness needed our crimes for dung.
Like winds we howled about you, but all our loudness served
Only to blow your smouldering charity into a golden flame.
Are not we the nobler, the more honourable we?
You had an hour's pain on earth, with certain Heaven at end;
We have pains in Hell for ever, to get you into Heaven.
Harp, ay, keep on harping; we know for why you harp,
So that we shall not be heard, the sacrificed for good.—
How 's that, my lad? Hurrah for Hell!

SON. But why?

TRAMP. You simply, Hell did that.

SON. It did not take me.

TRAMP. O world, that 's just your way. You sit a stock
When new songs are thrown at you, mumbling still
Old idiocy, and living in your past.
But when I'm dead and rotten, 'twill be then
'Yon was a poet if you like, a jockey!'
Whereas the truth is I am out of date.
Poor world, yours is the loss. O I've been paid.
We who blink not for the swung sword of Heaven,
We with the calling danger in our blood,
Gladdest of fighters under the sun, must be
Our own paymasters;—I've fought, and been worsted,

Matter for pride! For I am one whose ears
Seldom have not the din of the warring drums
That troop the brave lusts and the crafty sins.
The listed under the flags of our revolt
Look not for wages: they affront defeat
Who go against the seated force of the world
That names itself eternal good and justice,
And gets belief, since it knows how to punish.
We have no knees for it; and let them shoot
From their advantage on the walls of Heaven,
The service of the Lord, their malice aimed,
Their slingèd war of sickness for our flesh
And madness for our minds, we'll stand upright
And be ourselves, not good. Do you know me, boy?
Am I hunger and rags to you? Fool, I have been
One of the mutiny that attempts God
And to take landing on the side of Heaven,
For foothold on the slippery peril of wall
Reaching and tearing at God's sheer resentment,
Still to be thrown down by the towering glass,
A litter of upturned faces, gesturing
Against the calm front of his Sabbath's wall,
The desperate height of shining builded scorn.
This I have been; there is not in the land
A surgeon but, examining me, would
Tell you I speak the truth. However, here
And now, I'm chiefly hunger. Who was he
Who first invented supper? I perceive
The greatness of that man. [*The mother has come back.*

SON. Is that you, mother?

MOTHER. We sleep hungry to-night.
——Who 's this?

TRAMP [*bowing*]. I greet you, woman of the house;
I also greet the supper, though I smell none.

MOTHER [*low*]. Michael, Michael?

TRAMP. Where 's that?—Lad, did you hear
A girl's voice speaking?—O my wits.

MOTHER. Michael!
I never thought of you as growing old.
TRAMP. The stuff they sell for brandy now-a-days!
Poisoned I am. Here 's a kind lady asking me
What will I take for supper, and my hearing
Is made so foolish, it 's as if some dream
Spoke,—one of my songs, one of my loves,
Who knows? Some memory it is.
MOTHER. Michael infirm! Michael broken and crippled!—
O not to meet you thus I've tired and prayed.
The years would not have gone more cruelly
Over you if they had been flames. Your brow
Is written on in sorrow. Do you mind
A lap you laid your head in once, a hand
That could unmark the trouble from your brow?
TRAMP. There have been many, woman or dream or ghost
Or madness—that, I think. I knew you'ld come.
MOTHER. I have you again. I heed not anything
But that. I cannot tell how it had been
Were you still happy and great-spirited. Now,
So poor, so hurt, so wronged with age,—and I,
Too long lacking you, have had injury.
Time is for both of us we found each other.
Will you not know me, Michael?
TRAMP. Yes, your voice
I know.
MOTHER. Unkind! Am I so gone from you?
TRAMP. If this is madness, it 's a gentle one.
Come you to punish me? Are you my sins
That speak so ruthful? I repent me not,
Nor if you shift your softness into gibing,
And stop my sleep with moans. If there was harm
Done through me, let the Lord repent, not me.
I will not lighten Him of any guilt.
MOTHER. Poor sick distracted brain,—O how you need
Me and my love, thank God! All that I have
To give you, and take nothing,—only thus

Can I relieve the pent and suddenly-thawed
Plenty of love, loosed from a stiffened winter
To pour and well like an inward bleeding wound
Oppressing over my heart. Give me this ease
Of caring for you, finding out your comfort;
I want no other kindness from you.

TRAMP. Woman,
Who are you?

MOTHER. Michael, you do not know me?

TRAMP. O cannot you see I'm blind?

MOTHER. Alas! and yet
I should be glad: you need me more than ever.
But—blind! You for whose eyes the earth put on
Such wonder! You visited! O it is wrong, wrong!

SON. Is it now, mother? Is this the man?

MOTHER. What say you?
Michael, he is our son. You did not know
It was a son? He 's well framed? Ah, I forgot.—
Boy, come and kiss your father.

SON. Cunning, cunning,
O my mother 's cunning.

TRAMP. We travel too fast
For me; it seems, I've run into a wife:
Let me breathe there awhile. Lo, I, the rebel,
The wanderer, the lawless, settled down
A husband, all in five minutes! It 's a great change, lady.
Yet if the Flying Dutchman could not 'scape,
Why, how should I?—But for this family,—
Presenting me at once with a full-grown heir
Is mighty sudden. And it isn't decent.
I'm all for being decent now.
Is that big man my son, though? What 's his trade?
Is he a large eater?—Be dutiful,
My son, honour your poor dear worthy father,
Who so unselfish was he at great pains
Begat you, and to whom you owe that now
You hunger in this miserable world.

Surely this asks a large return in love,
Such care for your well-being, and you still
Unborn? I hope you have it for me, son?
But don't salute me; we've embraced already;
Your loving is too violent for me.

MOTHER. Let him but kiss you. Child, will you kiss your father?

SON. Yes, I will kiss him.—O I like this cunning.

MOTHER. You know me now, dear?

TRAMP. If you're she I think,
I may as well admit that yon's my boy.
Strange, but I never thought of you as still
Alive.

MOTHER. I'm filled with you, my brain and heart.
You make me foolish, dear. For deep within me
Some vague discomfort lies, a dumb warning,
Which cannot come into my thought, for you
Taking so much room there. Just now, when I
Was stricken with you, and into its wont,
Long dry of it and closed, the love ran warm,
And I was all in pangs of the sudden loosening,
A sharp fear flasht in me; something there was
I must provide against: but what it was
I cannot tell for sure. It must wait, then;
It may come back.—And now, your hand 's in mine!
The thing must give place in my thought to that.
—You are silent, Michael.

TRAMP. Am I? Well, I suppose
It 's too much happiness is gagging me,——
What did you say your name was?

MOTHER. Alice. Ah! [*She sighs.*

TRAMP [*springing up*]. No!
Not she? Not Alice? O I did not think it was you.
You've been a sorrow, Alice.—Why have you come
To spoil my dear regrets?—The others were
Despairs, not loves. I would meet any of them
Nor wince;—but you!—O Lord, am I ashamed?
No, I'ld liever not have found you.

SON [*aside*]. More long,
Surely, than needs. There 's one chance missed already.
TRAMP. I have bitterly blamed you, boy; but I forgive.
Your coming frightened me away from her
A many years agone; but let that be.
In sign whereof, come here and you may kiss me.
Pardon the lack of veal; I don't keep cows.
MOTHER. Ah, thank you, Michael. For he is
Our love, and kissing him will be to take
That to your heart again. I will lead you to him——
O God, what 's this?
TRAMP. You choke me: free my throat,
Blast you!
MOTHER. Let him go, fool, it 's not the man.
I've changed my mind, too. Hear me, you devil, loose him!
TRAMP. Did you mean this, Alice? [*The struggle ends.*
MOTHER. Is he dead, my God, dead?
SON. Why, he was weak and frail under my hands;
You mistook his danger. I've not failed you now?
And you were always saying that I would.
Will you not praise me, mother?—
[*Whimpering*] Why don't you speak?
MOTHER. [*She has been sitting bowed over the dead man. Slowly she raises her head and looks at her son, dry-eyed.*]
This crime is mine.—O cramp is at my heart.—
I have the guilt. I need not so have grieved
About your eyes: it was I who was blind.
I know not how to bear you close to me,
The touch of your hands will be a fearful thing
For me henceforth.—Give me your hands in mine;
The Lord in Heaven knows nothing can be
To any human soul more horrible
Than these poor dreadful hands: therefore I kiss them,
And it may do for prayer. At Judgement Day
Tell them, my child, you did not make his death.
I will not share it. It is all mine.

THE FOOL'S ADVENTURE

IN FOUR DIALOGUES

I

The Seeker. *A Hermit.*

SEEKER. I know, between all kinds of the world there are
No layers, no division: stone, leaf, flesh,—
All 's flowing, like a stream of many waters.
But like a spilth of oil in the stream
Man's nature the same current flows along
Unmixing in the general kindliness,
Showing like slime against the deep wise water.
All Being with mankind and the sin of man
Refuses mixture; Sin is for man alone;
Yet is he carried down the same tendency
As the great pomp of all the creatures goes.
Who, that has read into the soul of man,
But is not ware that man's unhappiness,
Wherein he lives as in a smoke, comes hence?
He travels the same way, under the same force,
As all the beasts; yet being not a beast.
And this is Sin. What I must find is how
Man may be man, yet sinless.

HERMIT. It is with mind
That thou hast read man and the world?

SEEKER. How else?

HERMIT. Thou hadst done better with love.

SEEKER. I take not that.

HERMIT. The mind is to interpret to the heart:
Only the heart can answer to the world;
Mind knows the speech, but the heart the meaning.

SEEKER. Well, to my question. Where grows the root of sin?
What a strong thing it is! Almost it seems
That Good is only if Sin lets it be.

Who is the monger of man's Good and Bad?
What knowest thou of the world? Knowest thou this?
But that can hardly be, for thou hast not,
I have heard say, left once this little valley
These twenty years agone. And nowadays
Experiment, not musing, is the thing.
Thou canst not know the ways of men.

HERMIT. My son,
These many years I have not been perplext
With the loud manners that fill all the towns
Of little-thoughted men. Here in my hut
I have perused with all my sense the earth,
And never once out of this valley gone.
I think, better I know the world than those
Who take abroad, into strange lands, small minds,
And choke their wonder,—that, the only sluice,
Easily out of gear, where through may pour
The pressure of Truth outside us, the deep world
Our enclosed minds are sunk in,—that they choke
And clutter up with gluts of rarities,—
Voyage the warm seas, where mild as mercy blow
Molucca breezes from the nutmeg woods,
Or brave the festering Congo and the jaws
Of crocodiles that guard Zambezi fords,
Through feverous land and a drumming din of flies
Up to the thirst of Tartary, and beyond,
Adventuring into the Northern night,
To roam the haunted frosts, and hear far off
Ice-thunder round the pole, the shouldering floes.
As farmers put heapt trash in an empty barn
They store in corners of their memories
Lumber from all the climes. Has foreign ground
More meaning in it than an English field?
But I, still staying in this upland hollow,
Where the earth gets up in royal attitudes
About me, sovereign for leagues, first ground
The weather treads on, visiting the plains,

Do better with my hills and silences.
That mountain yonder—look how the fells rise
And lift themselves endeavouring, till they achieve
Power upon space and a ken not disturbed,—
The unconcernèd summit of grey stone,
Aloof in its own wisdom, greatly calm:
And not a tree to break the mighty swerve
Up into middle sky, the whole upheaval
Plain to be seen. The figure of that hill
If one should spend a life considering,
He would not die ignoble; and it would
Outlast a long life's questioning. Besides,
I have the continual workings of the air;
Who, that is wise, has ever tired of these?
Never an hour has been, since I came here,
That I could look upon nor be amazed.
Look at this rain now; that was a great event!
A darkened murmurous half-hour of rain
And hidden stormwork on the mountain-heads,—
Out of the clefts and off the ledges pours
The drenching (but its work is left behind);
And down the scarred cliff-sides suddenly lives
A white releasement of a hundred streams,
A gleam like weather'd marble-veins in the sun.
For, ere the shower seems well begun, the last
Tatters of its proof gloom are leaving us,
Drawn after the hasty errand of the storm;
The sagg'd awning furls, and sunshine is let in.
And now that the dinning rain is gone, a voice
Known dimly through the rattling past, talks plain,—
The water milling the heavy stones, and long
Grumbling of boulders from their beds dislodged;
Like buried roar of gongs that have been heard
Sounded in faery halls under the hills.
And all the pother—wherefore? Half a day
Maybe it takes for the spate to fulfil itself
(From here to the sea is scarce a score of miles),

To bank its load of gravel privily
In thievish guarded cellars of the water;
Then into new storms, and all is to do again.
Wherefore?—No need for me to ask Wherefore?
I know it part of a Self, as a stray feeling,
A startle, say, at a chance sound, is part
Of my Self. He who has wondered all so well
As I these twenty years at streams and hills,—
Who has become their rashness, been their bulk,
Going into their nature, putting on
Their being and their mood and their old usage,—
Knows that of all this world there is a Self;
And, in some region of existence, lies
The Presence of this Self. Nor deem, my son,
Thy race a thing apart, not common kind
With Earth, these hills, that lake and its margent reeds
That greenly dusk over the evening in it.
It may be, we are close to the wheel's rim here,
Touching the hooping tire of forged law,
And things seem separate; but all, like spokes,
Are towards the nave, and fixt in it at root,
The Self of the World. There is the authority
Of the brook's speed, and of man's Good and Bad.

SEEKER. And there, in the presence of this self, will be
The mastery of Sin?

HERMIT. There, if at all.
But who may talk with it? Or who shall go
Into its place?

SEEKER. Truly, if none e'er tries,
None knows.

HERMIT. Well, if you go to find this thing,
Your journeying must be through reigns of mind
Rather than lands and tongues.

SEEKER. It must be tried.

II

The Seeker.

I have achieved. That which the lonely man
Spoke of, core of the world, that Self, I know.
Like one small pool to the reach of Heaven, I
Am open to a vastness. Hearken, thou,
Do I not know thee right? Thou art the deep
Whereunto all things yearn unwearyingly,
Some unaware, some hating that they yearn,
But all into a stillness, into Thee,
Falling at length, and their unrest is done,
Until again thou blurt them out of thee,
Out of the middle to the rind. And yet
Not them, but piecemeal what they were
New-fangled into other companies.
It is as if, not only once, far off,
Aloof from place and being I had watched
The spell betwixt two happenings end again;—
The dark's distress, slow qualms mastering it,
Blind thrills, and last, the sudden pang of light.
Methinks, plainly as I've felt earth's swoon
Wince at the touch of spring, awakening her,
The peace, thy region, shudder I have felt
When with it meddles thy new imagining;
And in the smooth element, ruffling, grows a throb,
Marring with its strong rhythm the prone calm,
Beat of the fresh beginning of an order;
One settled eddy at last, whose scouring kirtles
Gather to substance and perplexèd shape,
To thickening spots of coarse, and curds of fire.
Again within the unform'd principle
Stress, that it have a grain; and yet more stress,
Till the unbounded shiver of light shatter
Innumerously, and into the clear inane
Come like a ghost another swarm of motes

Shepherded by thy thought into new flocks,
Away from thee, outward, circling, numberless kinds;
Yet the same partner, the old lust, is with them,
Unrest, severance from thy quietude.
Nor first, nor last of them, this swirl of stars,
Unlike the others, but in this thing like.
I from the place in Being called Mankind
Am come, seeking thee, and look, I know thee.
Not with my sense and reason only; these
Man fashioned for near needs of common life:
Good tools, but to find thee of no more use
Than ladders to thatch houses reach the sun.
Not Reason finds thee, though he walk with gait
Taking gulfs in his stride as far across
As in his yearly bout the throw of Saturn.
My wisdom was to practice with the power
Emotion, since I knew it was, though stall'd
In Somewhere, yet a piece of the Everywhere.
I knew my soul or self lied, when she said
Throughly she knew that stud of forces named
My body,—they all knew her and obeyed:
For this her hand did never bit, nor could.
Because it was more honourable than she
And all her royalty of sense and reason,
I humbled her and these before this thing,
And taskt them with a long and bitter work
To build a watch-tower, that the gaze therefrom
Might peer over the impracticable dykes
Of nature; in that roofless hermitage,
Unneighbour'd of Life, but viewing the whole Fate,
This thing I found in me, Emotion, watched;
And all Fate spake with her, like as the noise
Of shawms and sackbuts may wake fellowship
In a harp's unused strings; 'twas so she thrilled
Answerably to Fate as to a din,
The Emotion I have in me, being in tune
With Fate, the greater passion with the less,

Each to the other kith. 'Tis this in me,
Thou Self of the World, that knows thee now. And now
That thou art known, what answer, Self of the World?

The Voice of the World.

So I am known. And which of my desires
Has won to know itself, and so known me?
SEEKER. I am Man. Man knows thee here.
WORLD. Thou strangest of me,
Man, it were better hearing had some other
Thrown back a sense along its own sleuth from me.
SEEKER. That I believe, if only 'tis with Man
Thou dealest, that, knowing, he accuses thee.—
Thou answerest not? Art thou amazed if Man
Accuses thee? But I will show thee cause.
Whether thou couldst be if the world were not,
Or wert before the world, and in a mood
Made it as if it were a song,—wilt be
When thy song's riming fails, thy mood doth change,
I know not,—only thou art to the world
A Self. But all things come from thee, and all
Go thither back. Here, we are part of thee,
But there, we are thou thyself. But thou hast mixt
Sin into Man: though, like all else, his nature
Is towards thee, this pricks away from thee.
Or is it that the tether unto thee
By teeth of ragged gyves is fastened on him,
So that to him cruel is thy constraint,
The Law, to all else gentle, unfelt, alone
Hurtful to Man? Ay, hear now what Sin is;
For what is named Man's knowledge of Himself
Is just pain of this gnawing, which keen self-knowledge,
The bitter discomfort to be part of thee,
So fiercely burns within him that the white flame
Called Consciousness ousts from its habitation
All but its own delusion, its lamp of pain,
Dafts from man's wit the clew thou hold'st him by,

Cheats him to think he may have power to follow
Laws of his own, not thine,—that he is not
In thee, worsening his lot tenfold,
Making him still tug at the biting gyves.
For this does man accuse thee. Hast thou not
Power upon thine actions? Surely, Lord.
Do so, that man is never more a nest
For Sin. The chief thing thou hast given Man
Is, that he has the noble power to hate
Himself: to be aware of the flange of Law,
Which is to hate it, though he know it not.
And what is Law but the feeling after Thee,
The blind desire in things to be at one
With thee? So Man desireth, and alone
Hates his desire, the main thing in his being.
Man has gone out of the large commonalty;
The rapture and the kinship of the earth,
The strained blue ecstasy of the night and stars,
The faith whereby the mountains still endure
In their old attitude of prayer, the psalm
Of young brooks, and the loud seas' prophecy,—
No like to these for Man, no part in this
The one thing common through the world that makes
Life of the flesh, flame of the marrying atoms,
Strength of the hills, speed of the airs, be one.
He hates the law, and therefore hates himself,
Hates Thee, that is. Thou see'st what comes of this?
With desperate flings he tries to be rid of Law,
But only makes the flange gride harshlier;
The beasts lust blindly, but Man craftily,
For pleasure: but 'tis as a fever thirsts;
To Man alone, from the dust his footsteps mark
Gives nature to lift eyes and see the large
Kind-season'd region that he travels through;
But also (and this asks for all his gaze)
Gives him to see Death sitting by the way,
To measure fearfully the space between

His robe clutcht, and grim alms demanded of him.
Self-knowledge wretched for self-ignorance happy:
This is thy doing. Does this seem to thee
Good?

WORLD. Peace, for here be neither good nor bad;
I am myself, not Man. Thou knowest me?
Not so. I am not sinful, nor am good.
Atoms have their own nature, and the stars,
All life, slime, spawn, grass, birds and beasts, their own,
Each than the last more manifold, a new kind.
The thing that, quickening in the beast's dark brain,
Made the beast no more beast but Man, was Sin;
White courses to the stars, and sin to man.
Thus is it to me;—to thee, it is not good?
And what have I to do with this?

SEEKER. Art thou
He to whom Man lifts his thought, the God?
But no, I think thou art some outer devil,
Filching the voice of Him who is within
The clouds of Time and the World, hangings that hide
God and his love and zeal.

WORLD. But, if thou wilt,
What thou art I will shew to thee.
My thought
Moved in its brooding, and its movement stirred
A ripple in the quiet of the waters
Whereunder my thought's Sabbath is moored deep,—
The region of the happening of my Will.
And when my act, this ripple's viewless travel,
In its upheaval reacht the upper calm
Laid on the mere, whose waters are my Will,
Whose surface is Appearance and broad Place,
Its breaking whirls became a journeying wave,
That at the last became a gathered sea,
A pile of all the waters in one tide.
But it is grown to its height; and now, before
The smooth heapt power tumbles down in surf,

Its head is whiten'd with an age of spray,
Weakness beginning. Lo, that spray is Man,
Crest of the wave, and token of its downfall.
Not stately, like the early wave, nor clear,
Nor with an inner lodging for the light,
But troublous, misty, throwing off the light
In glitter, all apieces, loose, uneasy.
Truly my act is near its end when thou,
Man, the loose spray, ride on its stooping neck,
From one firm bulk of waters, one onward gang,
Broken away to be a brawl of drops,
Freedom and hither-thither motions light,
Each drop one to itself, a discrete self.
Thou freedom, thou high self-acquaintance, thou Sin,
Man, dost thou know me? But now know thyself.

III

The Seeker. *A Sage.*

SEEKER. At first I thought it was not God; but now
I have no hope left. For I went abroad
Asking for certain knowledge of God's goodness,
Which none could give me. Then at last I saw,
Although his speaking squared not with my wish,
There was no cause to doubt my reason's word,
That the World's Self must be what man calls God.
SAGE. Give not up lightly.
SEEKER. Was this a light thing,
After my hopes and seekings, to find God
Careless, nay, bitterly mocking man for sin?
SAGE. I am an old man talkative and dreamy,
This search of thine remembers me of one
Strange dream I had a many winters gone.
Shall I have patience from thee if I tell it?
SEEKER. I came here for advice, not dreams. I guess,
Whether thou hast my patience or hast not,
I shall not leave thee till it 's told. Is it long?

SAGE. It was a slave, and he toiled with a kern
Made, as it seemed, of one blue shining stone,
Clearer and bluer than Eryri's waters.
And the kern held strange corn, gold grains and silvern,
Which, being ground, threw up a dust of light,
And motes of light were tangled in his hair,
And like a gramary the glittering chaff
Misted that crooked toil, that fair it seemed,
Nothing so radiant as that slavery.
Where was that strange corn sown? said I, and who
Is master of thee and so rare a kern?—
He turned, and lookt at me through the bright haze.
He was an angel, and the sapphire kern
The hollow heaven, and the corn he ground
Was all the silver stars and golden suns.
Still of that grist and brittle light I askt:
What acre was it drilled in, by whose hand?—
I was not at the sowing, answer'd he;
But He who ploughed, whose coulter brake the clods,
Told me His Word was sown at large in a field
Broad cast, and soon would spring. I watched for it;
Lo, this was the crop,—His Word, but so enwrapt,
So huskt in light, so sheathed in a harsh rind,
Long must I bray it, blowing off the chaff
And shining flaky scabbards of the Word,
This corn, before the Word itself I find.
But I was wiser than the angel then;
And I suppose he 's grinding still, unless
His Master has been by, and told him light
And all such husks are quite fit things for study.
Who looks to find the Word by freeing it
From casing draff, is like when his shift ends
To have found nought else but husk. Be sure
If anything seems dirt and husk to you,
You're not the man is going to find the Word.

SEEKER. Here 's nought to my purpose. But thy memory
Leaks, I suppose, like all old vessels do.

My quest, as I have told thee once, is this:
Out of the brutish rose up man: the clay
Upon the wheel of years became a jar;
But when 'twas fully fashion'd, it had caught
From some strange shower liquour such as clay
Never before was moist with: Man was sinful.
Why he, who let shape Man, should so have used
His work, pouring into him Sin, I seek.
The clay were better still an unhandled lump
Than wrought only to hold such sour evil.
But if it be possible, I would find what means
May empty Man of sin: this was my quest;
But what hope, now that I have talkt with God
And heard Him speak?—A raven's voice, his bill
Up to the neesings sunk in a lamb's wet life,
His chuckling greed half-smother'd in the warm inwards,
That scarce he could bark his kill, so choked, would sound
Startling the quiet of a hill-shut noon
In sunny early summer, kindlier
Than when God talkt with me.

SAGE. When didst thou talk
With God?

SEEKER. Have I not told thee?—the world's soul
I knew, and is not that the God?

SAGE. Poor fool,
And didst thou think this present sensible world
Was God?

SEEKER. No, not the knowledge of the senses,
But the world's heart; the gathering place of all
Being: the weir of all the flowing Powers,
The limbeck whereinto are poured all storms
And quiets, duties of the elements,
Whether to be firm standing or steep ruin
And all betwixt, man and his mind among them,
To be confused there and throed forth again;
The sea whose measureless tide conquers its shores,
Then, ebbing, buildeth of far-journeying silt

New wharves, mud all astir with a writhe of growth,
Till the deep want them, and they move again,
Knowing whose hand upon their shoulders laid:
Then is a curdle of worlds loosed again
And is abroad in the great deep again.
I mean the soul, that feeds on many dooms
And waits now for this world; there is allowed
Nor part, nor kind, nor shape, in space or time,
Therein, nor law; but these come out of it.
Over its own expressions, heavens and stars,
Fires and lightnings, life, thought, sin and pain,
The ever widening roundures of the work
One act thrown up by it must make, it broods;
But they, remembering That whence they came,
Each gathered crowd of things, and of Its presence
Deeply aware, by fine unthinkable nerves
Are tied to it, and have it for a self.

SAGE. Just that, for one who thinks, does the World mean.
And that thou thoughtest God?

SEEKER. I did.

SAGE. Therefore
I said, Poor fool.

SEEKER. What is it then?

SAGE. The world?
It is a name.

SEEKER. What wilt thou mean? What name?

SAGE. The name Lord God chooses to go by, made
In languages of stars and heavens and life,
The senses life achieves, and wills and lusts
Up to the top of life, man and his sin,
All is the writing of the name of God.

SEEKER. Fantastic and quite out of date. But I
Have cleaned my senses' panes of spider-work
That ignorance webs on them, know the world
Not a blurred shadowy thing, that darkling peers
(Uncertain which is world, which window's dirt,)
Into the mind, a ghost; a real world mine.

I know this growth about me, stones, herbs, beasts;
Stars and their golden games in the blue heaven
I know, and the life that runs through all, and what
It runs towards;—how the grand heats will be
A stupid frost, and all the young lustful matter
Decrepit, gone unhandsomely into crumbs.
And I, perhaps the sole of living minds,
Know what this is,—the end of separation,
The return to the Self of this happening.
I know that all, while here in their proper strength,
Are present to the Self, I know that all
Feel that the Self is ware of them—Enough;
The Self under the world is real, the world
Is therefore real in it. And how jumps this
With what thou talk'st of a Name?

SAGE. Easily.
As the meaning to the letters or the sound,
So that, thou call'st a Self, is to the World;
This, the characters; that, the Name indeed.

SEEKER. Ay, I have heard thou art a poet. So
All trials such as I do on the world
Are nothing to thy fantasy. And yet
I failed, for that which I uncovered was
No monger of the good and bad. Where then
Wons he who holds the store of good and bad?
Is there another? Canst thou tell me aught?

SAGE. I have not travelled much, but I have talkt
With those who in far regions use to fare.
And they, among encounters and strange tales,
Oft mention of a king whose palace lies
Upon the edge of place, the verge of things.
None ever found admittance at his gate;
All manner of war has spent itself against
His cliffy walls, never an embassage
Won to his presence. So the neighbouring kings
(And great lords they) speak of him as their Lord.
I tell the rumours as I had them told.

But it is said, Sin has been heard to boast
(Some have known Sin and have had speech with him)
He knew a postern, and the trick of its lock,
Whereby he might, at any time, be in
The house of the unseen king. It may be, then,
A parley with this prince, could it be had,
Were helpful to the shutting up of Sin;
As, if one prayed him set a hidden guard
Behind the postern, which might seizure make
Upon this insolent intruding Sin
When next he dares creep into holy rooms.
Or if, as I have thought, this unknown Power
Be he that doth commission Sin, then ask
For why is his employment, on what grounds
Sin's warrant were withdrawn; so strike with him
A treaty. Maybe thou wilt find in him
Thy monger of the good and bad. Come then,
And I will tell thee all that I have heard
About the roads that go to this king's house.

IV

The Seeker.

Who is within this darkness?

The Voice from Within.

Whom thou seekest.
Adventure thou no further. Not for thee,
If any road beyond my dwelling goes.

SEEKER. Is there no wicket through this barrier'd gloom,
Uncertainty wall'd against my ken? Unlatch,
If to thy place be any door.

WITHIN. Not gloom,
Impotence; thou canst not understand my being.
My shape and the dimensions it inhabits
Are nought thy senses take, nor yet thy main

Intelligence. Therefore my presence is
Shut to them, dark. Theirs is the jail, not mine.
SEEKER. But whom I seek, thou art?
WITHIN. None other, I.
SEEKER. Art thou the monger of the Good and Bad?
WITHIN. I am.
SEEKER. Ah, I am come at my desire;
Now there is hope for thee, poor earth. Hearken,
Strange king; knowest thou that Sin?
WITHIN. I know him well.
He is now with me, here.
SEEKER. What, is Sin rooft
Under thy unplaced weather, within this weld
Of powers unknowable, thy house?
WITHIN. Ay, here.
SEEKER. But, when I left the world, he was among us,
Busy.
WITHIN. And still is in the world, and busy;
Yet is he here.
SEEKER. I pray thee, keep him penn'd.
I think thou canst not know how ill he does
Down there, among us men. Didst thou not think
Our life was to be clean, one purity,
One beauty, as the rain drops make one bow,—
Perchance, of all the many little minds,
One brain, capable of thy knowledge? Look,
I pray thee, how Sin spoils thy hope, whate'er
That was, but surely not the thing life is.
Look down from where thou art, the Heaven, and see
His meddling; how his enlargèd skill turns life
Into a foul unseemly mess—no good
A-hover o'er it now, nor able ever
Unto a higher state of Time to reach,
But still unshapen'd, crude, unworkt by Law
Into another quality, to sprawl,
Stuff not worthy Law's craft to fashion, waste
Of being, unsound, that will not bear the tongs

And hammering of thy workman, as all else
Is forged and smitten into new kinds and better,—
That will not answer to his handling, give
Obedience to his tools, being rotten, mixt
With sullen wrong. Thus has Sin done with life.
Beseech thee, pen him close, far off, O Lord.

WITHIN. That would be hard to do.

SEEKER. Yet surely thou
Hatest this foul-toucht grimly Sin?

WITHIN. Sometimes
Full bitterly I hate him, and sometimes
He is my friend.

SEEKER. O my hurt soul, thy friend?
But thou hast power over him?

WITHIN. It may be.

SEEKER. And Good and Bad, these are thy mongery?

WITHIN. They are, as I have said.

SEEKER. None else controls them?

WITHIN. None else controls or portions Good and Bad.

SEEKER. Then thou art God?

WITHIN. Ay, many call me so.
And yet, though words were never large enough
To take me made, I have a better name.

SEEKER. Then truly, who art thou?

WITHIN. I am Thy Self.

AN ESCAPE

Among mountains. Idwal, a poet.

IDWAL. A swift dark dream from the outer lands,
From the folk whose talk none understands,
Along my smooth sleep travelling,
Yet tampering not with my ken's rest,
Past as undisturbingly
As a night-jar o'er the quietude
Of the clear'd middle of a pine-wood
Seemeth to haunt the evening,
And leave the blue air yet more whist.
And yesternight it haunted me;
Again, suddenly, quietly,
Shadowy wings above my clear sleep.
But swift, so swift it might scarce be seen;
Not as with me it had to do,
But eagerly, as though it flew
From mystery to mystery,
And my sleep lay in between;—
Once before, and yesternight.
So twice I have felt its noiseless flight;
Twice has my sleep been the road
The dark message took in journeying
From the one to the other secret reign;—
Out of the dark lying behind,
Into that lying before, man's mind,
My sleep was the only bridge for the thing
Whereon to cross Reality.
But the third time, if it come again,
A stranger, unkindly from the abode
Of Beginnings sent to the place of Dooms,
Shewing me thus so easily
Way through the skirts of time to the glooms
That march both sides our bodily place,—

My soul will up and give it chase;
Out of my sleep my soul will slip
And ere that duty vanisheth
I'll o'ertake its moth-wing'd speed.
And be it a bird softlier fledge
Than white owl or brown night-jar,
Be softer the down on the wing's edge
Than combing crests of a snow-drift are
Which the smooth wind holloweth,
Of its shadowing I will be more aware
Than a mirror is of a swoon'd man's breath,
To find the guidance that I need.
I have great need of it: like a jail'd man
Am I, who having piteously craved
The strange use of light, is all the more thereby
Discomforted, to see how narrow his den—
The walls surpris'd leering at him, and glistening
Dank and unwholesome, sick with a waterish brash
That dribbles down and clots the drooping beards
Of long white cellar-growth, hopeless of sun;
Qualm'd with loathing, to stare on his puddled bed,
The unclean floor, and know how he mates on it.
As it might be with such an one, with me.
To look in on my being and the room
Whereinto it is shut, I left the thorp
(Whose morning peat-smoke hanging in the elms
Is in my brain even now,—Ah, the last time!)
And lived a winter in these treeless hills.
And I, unwise, have let in light to my being;
The rash lamp has uncovered the thing it is.
I am not one being, but caged enmity:
There are two kinds, shut by some sleight, although
More jarring when they meet than fire and water,
To fight like spider and scorpion in my mind.
And 'tis a box so narrow they are in,
Thrust face to face and knee to knee by the walls,
Lidded and luted down with kneaded flesh,

How can they loose or escape from the mewed coil?
And so twy-spirited is my flesh. Now where
These souls began I know not, but there 's one,
I know, that has been in Eternity
Before 'twas snared into this crafty body:
Still sorrows after the life it followed there;—
To this soul, strangely and I know not how,
The hills, and their great way of standing, gave
Heart, and this soul has thrown the other down;
It stands, in the midst of its captivity,
The master now: but it is still in the trap.
Rarely they planned this mind, the fowlers who
Lured with a hidden bait that unware soul
From out the unspoken region into the work
Contrived to gin it, this spider work of mind.
For if that other hold it not for the trapper,
Yet is there no way out of his skill, the mind.
Who is the nooser of souls, the many-rumour'd,
The shifty-named? I think he 's the same as Death:
Who profits by the trap, did he not make it?
The toil is rigged, and the soul lies fettered there,
And at his own good time the unheard Death
Comes up behind and puts out dark hands, versed
In the secret make of the mind, and takes the soul;
But who the man they call Death is, and how
He uses souls he nets, who ever told?
Not like, that he who goes so noiselessly
And can make snares so well, hath good intent.
But it may be, the captured in my flesh
Is not to wait for Death, insanely struggling.
Yet how to leave this place, and the difficulties
About it set, the gapless and strong pound,
The intricate mind, shutting the strayed soul fast?
For round the knowledgeable mind, which is
The sounding coloured manifold plenteous world;
Round this that is lit, much unlit region of mind
Investing lies, the dark unknown besieging

The self-known mind, the world; yet all is mind.
Island it is, bewildered all about
With thicketted hedges, fenced and hoarded close.
And if through these the mind's prisoner wins, then all
The marches of the mind are swamp and fen;
No footing there, but all a flinching ground:
There thought and ken are shelving banks, washt loose,
Fretted from firmness, trembling half afloat
In unknown tides, dark waters that emerge
From out the unnoised deep beyond, and whelm
Over the bars of place and time, intruding,
Infesting with dim sloths of flood, and then
Back to the darkness slipping, leaving gloomed
Shaking and dangerous the mind's wet coast;—
There is no going through these lands.
And right
To my dear need, this limb of the otherwhere,
This two nights' dream of mine, comes, easily
Crossing the unsure dim untrodden parts
Of foreign mind as if his wont was there.
I think it is because the brawl is done
Within me, and he who has lost Eternity
Has killed the other, the dream found my sleep
So good to fare in on his messages.
No sleep like mine for him; and a third time
He'll use it so. By a strange awareness,
I feel he 's looking from his place to try
The passage of my sleep again. My want
Of him and of his skilful travelling
Will be awake even in my sleep, and hard
After his speed the forgotten trapann'd thing
That was the guest of Eternity once, will run
Out of its jail, this World, the mind of man,
And be again free of its birthright house.
I have but to sleep a little, and 'tis ended.
And yet these three last nights have I hung back
From sleep, and delayed my delivering.

No more: the sleep-hunger dims my aching brain,
I have no strength against it. Scarcely am I
Moved that this is my last sight of the hills
And the morning that they wear so joyfully.

[*A Parson comes in.*

PARSON. Good morning, lad: I thought I smelt your fire.
And how's the spring with you?

IDWAL. Spring? Ay, is it spring?

PARSON. Are you just out of bed? But I have that
Will whet your wits. Some rascal of a tramp
Has broken in your cottage, stript it bare.

IDWAL. Why, that's a pity.

PARSON. It is; bare as my hand,
The dog! Well, I suppose you'll come down now
And help to catch the rogue. I'm sorry for you.

IDWAL. It's sorry I am for that perverted tramp,
As having gone from being the earth's friend,
Whom she would have at all her private treats.
Now with the foolery called possession he
Has dirtied his own freedom, cozen'd all
His hearing with the lies of ownership.
The earth may call to him in vain henceforth,
He's got a step-dame now, his Goods. And yet
Perhaps he's wise. If he pawns his theft
And drinks it all, why, he's all right again.

PARSON. You talkt about the sanity of the hills
(Pah!) when you came here. Did you learn this
From your commercing with them? You'll start tramp
Henceforward, and own nought, not even trowsers?—
It's as I thought: the hills do you no good.

IDWAL. No? Yet they've done me all I want.

PARSON. No good;
I always thought you wrong in coming here;
You are alive, and these bare hills are dead.
What give they you of life? And life's the thing.
Man must find wisdom among men. Pope said—

IDWAL. He did; quite right.

Often I have not known
Up here, if I be waking or asleep;
Yet something I have found of life.
PARSON. Ay, fancies,
Poet's reveries. One must *see* life, though.
IDWAL. I have come near to seeing life.
PARSON. Up here?
IDWAL. Maybe it 's not what you call seeing Life;
It served for me though. This is what it was.
I saw where walkt a Spirit in the skies,
But not himself I saw, only a robe
Large-folded, pale; like rain seen from a height,
When to the sightless going of the wind
It clings, down narrows in the hills deep-hewn,
A flapping steam gathered to the huge gait;
And shews a stature mightier than the mountains,
Blotting them out, to such a spacious stride
Waving, loose from the wind's shoulders in broad trail
So kingly drawn, crags underneath its hem.
So, unsure as the wet wind's grey garment,
I saw the Spirit walk, holding a storm
About him, wearing Life. Not whence it came,
The downward misty shower of Life, I saw,
Nor where it fell, but only that the Spirit
Had put its falling as a vesture round him.
But listen now:
What is to let the Spirit putting off
His wrap? Suppose it be of no more use,
And he unbrooch it at the neck, uncloak
Himself of the web of carded waters, Life,
Cumbersome grown, and lay it on the ground?
What then of Life? A pool in a flat place
Alone to mark where once was thrown in a heap
The work of shimmer, a godly piece of craft,
Carelessly, as outworn, taken away
From being a fine spinning and a rayment,
Its fashion lost, only the substance left

Discarded, valueless, and not accounted,
Out of it all the skill that gave it worth.
See you?—But does not this look dangerous?—
I would escape from Life.

PARSON. Then, I suppose,
You are after death?

IDWAL. What use is death to me?
I spoke of Life as one broad tissued thing,
A whole, seamless and woven right across.
You, when you speak of life, mean still—Yourself.
To my seeing, with a random light that lives
And shifts within the web, the cloak is shot;
And where the gleam comes, there is thought and feeling,
But shadow overtakes the rippling sheen,
And then the vagrom tide sets back again.
Death is the light removed; but you are still
In the same elements as when you lived,
When the light visited you; although you change
The habit of the sun for a dark wont
You do but shift your nation. Yet have I hope,
Though tangled thus in Life, to win escape.

PARSON. To one like you, who sees so widely, then,
The matter of Self must be a thing too small
To be considered?

IDWAL. But because I have learnt
Myself up here I would escape from Life.

PARSON. Well, let us have your notions of the self.

IDWAL. There is war in man.

PARSON. Ay, you are not the first
To find that out.

IDWAL. As far as concerns me
I am the first, however.

PARSON. What is your war?

IDWAL. It is of two desires.

PARSON. Right, flesh and soul.

IDWAL. I know not what those two words mean. I say,
Desire of infinite things, desire of finite.

But what you call your soul is more than half
The finite longing, and the infinite
Is all a cripple and a starveling in you.
But still, though maimed, it keeps the struggle up,
For 'tis the wrestle of the twain makes man.
—As two young winds, schooled 'mong the slopes and caves
Of rival hills that each to other look
Across a sunken tarn, on a still day
Run forth from their sundered nurseries, and meet
In the middle air, forgetting that they meant
A game there, each with his hold the other's flight
Hampering, till their spent lockt hatred falls
Troublesome on the lake, a foolish whirl
Of crooked motions dinting upon the calm
Which from its seat the sky had taught the waters;
So must these two desires, when they meet,
Grapple so fast their either aim is lost,
But in a wrangle round each other spin;
And each puts out his strength, not to go onward,
But quite to baulk and hinder and capsize
This insolent assault of the wrong desire:
And when they close, their struggle is called Man,
Distressing with his strife and flurry the bland
Pool of existence, that lay quiet before
Holding the calm watch of Eternity.
—He has another name, and that is—Evil.

PARSON. And neither ever gets the upper hand?

IDWAL. Ay, one not seldom—not the Infinite.
But if the finite longing has advantage
And need not give his whole force to the fight,
Then have you painters, singers,—I was one;
I am not now, the other is lord now.
But till the time when, three months back, I came
To this austerest earth, and left behind
Orchards and plains, by that desire I was
So mastered, that I never lookt at aught
Except to herd Time's flocks: enough for me

If on an early autumn afternoon
The whole country air smelt burning, and the blue
Wood-smoke loitered about the yellowing copse
And misted all the rides, and the earth seemed
To catch her breath and with a frightened air
Stand in the middle of her summer dance
Surprised, still holding in her listless hands
The fruits and flowers of her game, all tranced
In a glad posture, but a wild appeal
Setting her eyes and lips wide, what may mean
This strange sweet mischief working in her breast,
This longing of her limbs and heart for sleep.
Or could I be in a steep-sided dene
When the new gladness makes a straining song
Sleek every speckled throat, and at my feet
The turf is flower'd and makes sweet the breath
Of cattle, and between the blue there hangs
The golden-green awakening of the oak,—
That was enough. But this is ended now;
And now the infinite desire within me
So easily reigns, shy things that not belong
To space or time may travel through me, free
From meetings with the impudent questioning
Of thoughts that have to do with size or shape,
Encounterings with matter, when it is
The kind called Memory. My friend, a man
Who has been way for these wandered strangers looks
After them gone, and sickens to be with them
Out of the world, and out of measurement.
Who knows our little world of din
Beleaguered round with silences,
Listens from out this noisy inn
To catch some rumour of the peace,
The quiet that around him is,
Soon finds the talkative throng'd room
Too close about him, too shut in,
And yearns to go from light to gloom.

PARSON. As you do, I suppose. But how is he
To leave the world, since Death is of no use?
IDWAL. Better visitors there be
That come to some few men than he,
The noiselessly-shod murderer,
So skilled in using his kind knife.
And where they come there's no more fear
Of staying in the toil of life,
Or being in death's captivity.
PARSON. Now listen to me, boy. You have not thought,
It may be, you are doing wrong; but I,
Who know, I tell you here and now, you are;
This talk of life as a haphazard thing,
This strange distaste for being, is all wrong
And gravely wrong.
IDWAL. Before my winter here
Wrong was a meaning to me. O, I went
Much in large vision of the good and bad:
The flies of hell blackening on the world,
And angels doing chores up and down heaven.
But lately quite another view of both
I got: I learnt to go outside my mind,
So saw the ministers of good and bad
In their own proper likeness,—not as they
Earnestly masquerade before us men.
When to the world, which is man's mind, they come,
They have a part to play; 'tis only a part:
Outside, they are one set,—and foolish talk
It is that says they hate each other there.
I slipt outside the world once, and there pried
Upon a festival; fragrant it was
Of wine poured lavishly and spilt about
On the blue floor, like golden morning spilt
Over the sky; and you breathed music there.
You cannot think how blithe a fellowship,
How frank, was over all that gathering.
Angels and devils made up the whole party,

Sitting lovingly paired, wing laid to wing,
Leathery close to feathery, bat and bird;
Or dancing, wicked paws clasping white waists,
The delicate feet of angels twinkling bright
Among the hairy shins of fiends. 'Twas all
Clipping and dancing, good with evil, friends.
But where I go, nor good nor evil is.

PARSON [*to himself*]. Poor lad! No use for me to talk with him.
Hazel perhaps can do it. I were best
Leave them together. [*Aloud.*
Hazel is close behind.
She needs must kneel among the primroses
And lift them up where I had trod on them,
Strange girl!

IDWAL. Hazel is coming here, you said?
[*To himself.*] Ah, that stirs you, partner of mine?
Malingering were you? Still alive?
But you shall not handle me again.
[*Hazel comes in. The Parson goes.*

HAZEL. Good morning, brother. But how pale you look.
Your eyes, it is not health, such light in them;
And once they had a way of looking glad
If they saw me come near. What is it, dear?

IDWAL. No, Hazel, you are nothing to me now,
Nor all the world, nor all the songs I made.
I've found a better thing than you or these,
And I am leaving you and all of them.

HAZEL. Are you ill, brother? dying?

IDWAL. Nor ill nor dying,
But bidding God be with you, for my hand
Has found the latch it felt for, and the door
Is opening now that lets me out of the house
Of sky and earth; the winds that are without
Have learnt my name, and I must go to them.
They breathe against the door, impatient for me;
They have called to me, and I have hearken'd them:
Whether I would or no, they draw me now

Beyond beyond, into the elder dark.
And now I turn to you for the last time.
I do not see your eyes again, Hazel.

HAZEL. You must come back with us and we will nurse you.
You dying and the Spring come down again!

IDWAL. I am not dying, Hazel. I will try
To shew you how it is with me, Sweetheart—
Ah, that was wont spake, not myself, believe me.
Has it not been with you, all your spirit
Held by some beauty of the earth, as if
An outer voice startled you with your name,
Taking you out of the Hour's snake-eyed charm?—
Like a child, all intent upon his game,
Hears his dead mother softly calling him.
So held was I. With fine deceits and toils,
Nets of delight mastering all my limbs,
Prisoner was I in beauty of the earth,
And never knew my bondage: I heard no call.
—If you lie still, you may be tied with ropes
And be at ease. I know not why I paid
Heed all at once to the disquieting voice.
But when I did, my skin found, sure enough,
The ropes were there. But that is done; I step
Out of the writhen cordage I have fought,
The strangling of the world I freed my limbs from,
Thrown, see, at my feet, the foolish yarns.
I could have sworn they lived, and had within them
Striving, that made their bodies thicken and shrug
And roughen scales to rasp my skin, and hold
Against my labouring tight. What was mere rope
While I lay still, soon as I strained at it
Became a league of snakes. Well, they are dead,
And the world's felony has failed with me.
This was my winter's work up here, and now
I'm free to take the bidding of the voice.

HAZEL. What voice? O love, it's not been good for you,
This lonely winter here among the hills.

IDWAL. Hazel, you love me?—No, don't say you do,
But if you do, I'ld have you speak not quite
So tenderly. (I had forgot that break
Comes in her speaking when she 's sorry,—at least
I thought that pang in me was dead that wont
Leap in my heart at it, like a shrill string
Across my soul shuddering. Pray God
She speak not so again.) Will you not see
We are all changed?
This is not he you played with. I have been
In furnaces up here. You need not bring
Love to me now; 'tis a tune I have no use for.
What, will you still look so? I tell you, he
Whose thoughts had more obedience for you
Than for the wind the barley has, and more
Husht speaking at your way, he is done, spoilt.
Upon that self, that reeved and wrangling twist
Of forces, that fierce marriage of two hates
Or loves (what we call love and hate are one),—
That seeming quiet made of greeds, there toucht
Release like fire, cheating the earth's hold,
Blessedly saving me from consciousness.
Out of the cinders it was bound in ran
The secret of the ore, fined, ready for founding;
And what was one thing, now is plainly two
Though in one body kept; the trial Self
Withstood not, but bewrayed its making close,
That it is twain. My Self has come to an end.
And yet the consummation hangs; to halve
Wholly and all asunder put my being.
But it will come; I shall be loosed, and then
Caught up by the hair out of the unseeing race
At once I am no longer part of the world,
But like the rush of waters o'er one drowned,
The lapse of all the worlds slurs over me
One fire, run into one broad streaming flame
Going its unknown errand across space,

And leaves me in the naked dark, alone,
Large, and one of the first and latter things
That were before limit and certainty
And this old unhealth, from the beginning mixt
Into them, Consciousness, the disease. And now
No longer tied, not altogether freed,
Will you come here to mischief me with love?
Go from me. O if you but knew how I
Am looking to be taken out of me,
Out of the toil of Self, the fixity
In mixture of these two unreconciled,
Each with desire it sickens at and loathes
Fastened to each,—you would not tease me thus.

HAZEL. Ah, this is some false doing from outside:
You, whose glad senses stood so open, you
Who never failed of welcome for the green
And blue and gold of earth, who took in sun
And the grey presence of the rain alike, to be
Beauties within your heart, you to be harmed!—
This very morning, as I left the house,
I lookt up through the woods that hang behind,—
(For nowhere in the world surely is blue
So good for the heart as that of the early year
Between black leafless trunks at a slope's top)—
And looking up, lo, green against the blue!
Spring in her first glad hurry through the land
Had left on thorn and branch tatters and light
Frayings of her green careless robe. I thought,
Here is the Spring, and he'll be with us soon.
And then I thought of our delaying love.
It's gone from you then? But it's still with me.
My sister has a baby, a week old,—
To see her mothering it!—and I—never?
What am I saying?—
Love, do you hear me, love?—Is that word
Empty for you? nothing alight left in it?
See if I fill it not with stars again.

Look on me, and think, All of her is mine.
Does it not burn you? See, now I bare my arm.
Is it not well done, a good work, this flesh?—
And it was done for you. (Look still on me.)
O beauty of mine, catch me this man's spirit!
—And if it be required of me, I go
As far as sin to keep you. What care I
Who calls it sin? I am here charged by the earth
To bribe you back to her, spend I my holiest.
I dare not disobey her. Why, I am
The earth,—here in my being is the earth
Longing for motherhood as she ever does;
She would be good to you if you would let her.
—O the earth knows of her old enemy!
Not in the frame of things, not where there is
Comfort of light, nor any life but his,
But alone in his unhappiness he sits
Ill-favouredly eyeing her, bleak as his place,
Looking unwholesome charm at whom he can.
She knows not who he is, but that he turns
And sours man's blood, making it be a bane
Within his flesh, and an unkindly temper
Towards his blessing. O be very ware;
The outer wrong has hold upon your soul
To thieve it out of you and away from me.
It is a malice only: has it made
Promises to you? Did it use good words?
There is no trust in them. How can a thing
Never had nature, do you any good,—
You, made of earth, who fetched your life from her?
But I have better than words for you. Look here,
I'll show you what the earth is.
You see a girl only? I say, I am
The earth's disguise; she has left to be hills
And to go in her ways of beautiful strength,
But hither on this errand for your loved love
Come out of being Spring, to stand before you

In me the whole desiring of the goddess,
And win you to her heart again, my heart.
Look! the earth here stands open-armed to you:
Will you not try if the beating and the warmth
Of my life near to yours may not be good?
But try it! If here be no happiness,
It were easily left, and no harm done.

EDWAL. Aha, who 's master now? Ask me not, dear,
Why I have been so dull and sluggarded.
Some demon, that was shut within my being,
And long time lay at the bottom of my soul,
Awoke and grappled with me unawares.
Down, by some trick, he pulled me, for he meant
To choke me and escape from out my soul.
All this time he has kept me under, hands
Tight on my throttle, lest I spoke. But now
Your voice surprised him with dismay, and I
Remembered that this soul is mine by right,
Heartened by you; now am I uppermost
And he is under my tread: 'tis his turn now.
Ah! 'tis the same as ever it was,—the brow
Like day beginning, frank, the loopt hair winds
Are friendly with. Surely for loving more
Than man you were made, Hazel. It is as if
The moonlight came in a borrowed body once
For lip-love to a man, that you want me.—
As new to me and strange it is as when
First I dared take and hold her hand, brown
As a meadow-pipit's egg, and holding found
The beatings in her wrist close under my palm,
And marvelled that it was the self-same kind
Of life I had within my puddled flesh
That had put on such loveliness as you.
Now it begins again: it is as good,
As new and dinning as the first time was:
Like golden cymbals ringing in mine ears
It is to look at you. I dare not think

Too much, you're mine. O I'm alive again.
Only, I fear to sleep.

HAZEL. What fear's in sleep?

IDWAL. I half forget. But while he knelt on me,
Thrown, stupid, he knew the feud was not yet done;
He was not safe from me, though I was down.
And one of his bad kin lookt in on him
When sleep was round us, promising his aid.
Ah, but I feared that creature. Though he brought
No voice or shape to know him by, he was
About me a dark horror. What his land
Or folk is, know I not, but he was near
To naught is in the world.
And he, the fiend who fought me, eagerly lookt
For the next coming of his goblin friend,
And surely he would come along with sleep.
Three nights I have not slept.

HAZEL. O my poor boy!
What, haunted?—and I thinking of you all winter
Making the stature of the lifted hills
Felt in that song of yours. And now—O come,
Be in my arms at home again and see
If you'll not sleep there. Come!

[*She persuades him to her breast, and he sleeps awhile. Then her father, the Parson, returns.*

PARSON. Asleep? That's good. A sound sleep, too.

HAZEL. Father,
I'm frightened. Half an hour ago he sighed
And turned, shuddering. Put your hand on his heart;
I have not dared to.

PARSON. There's no need for that;
He is not sleeping. Come away, my dear.
—Thank God she's dazed with it. Send she keep so,
And I may get her home.—Come on, my girl.
I wonder what he died of.

PEREGRINUS

PERSONS

PEREGRINUS PROTEUS.
MARCON, a Christian.
CHORUS of Corinthian youths.

Argument.

PEREGRINUS, a man notable when the Christian Church was young, having famously lived a wicked life, publicly burnt himself in Greece.

Lucian has left one account of the manner of his dying. Another account is here set forth.

Before the Pyre

PEREGRINUS

Much bruit have I about the world, and fame,
A baying hound, hath never left my sleuth,
Nor left to noise the air with feats of mine.
But to be known have I much viciousness
Performed, and gone in lust for many years.
And now I come to burn myself, and this
Shall be the famousest of all my deeds.
I mean to be a flame and a flying smoke,
A wide astonishment to the dim minds
That hamper all the world. But I escape
From that obsequious fame that dogged my life
Yelping, a voice to please ignorant ears.
Now as my flesh shall marry the lit air
In golden burning, news of my bright death
Shall run a fiery gait upon the thoughts
Of upright men, an unaccustomed ardour.

Yet I grieve over my dear desires and lusts
That have to be so cruelly destroyed.
But there's no help; they are a mutiny,
They grow too strong, and would be masters in me.
I'll not have that. I'll ruin them with the flame
Rather than drive a team I cannot steer.
Moreover, as I burn my living flesh,
I write a message which, if men will read
And follow in the way I link them on,
Will make more joy and beauty in the earth
Than all the hopes of Heaven and fears of God.
When men shall fear their Selves, and after that
Worship their Selves (for worship's the one way
To make a thing sacred and worthy worship)
Men will have come to their full stature then.
Therefore I go into the pains of fire
To shew the world a symbol of such worship:
Nor can I any other way now give
Clean priestly service to my sacred part.
This Marcon too shall preach me to the lands,
I the Nehushtan and the Moses he.
Lo, Marcon comes, and up the ladder I
Reluctant climb: I tread no more on grass,
The earth shall no more be a road for my feet.
But I am climbing higher than this frame
Of timber, higher than any flame shall lunge,
When it is burning me, I climb aloft,
And draw man's thought towering after me.
It is not anguish of the fire comes now,
But the mighty anguish of becoming holy
After long dwelling in the shops of lust.
Air, thou fresh pleasant creature, dear to breathe,
Wilt thou become a fierceness in my lungs?
And thou, dusk evening, shalt soon be torn
With blaze, and reel at the manner of my end.
Here am I at the top. Lonely it seems;—
And I am hung over the risk of death.

MARCON

A hateful thing is friendship false; yet good
And profitable may it be if God
Bends, as he can, the crooked ill to straight.
I was a friend to Peregrinus,—friend
In seeming: with the falsehood I serve God.
This man, to draw the moths o' the world to his
Strange lore, here willingly will burn himself,
A death uncouth, to take the world aghast;
And worse than the loose heats and smokes of his life
Will be the pestilent reek of his wild death.
I must prevent him perfecting his death.
Godless and fraudulent he lived: his flesh
So trampled on his mind, no doubting knew
Great-lusted Peregrinus, but he sinned
His life away, not pausing 'twixt his bouts;
He was mere ravening of the baser kind,
Till in these storms unto a vile harbour
This poor ship drave, into the shelter of hell,
And rides calm, anchor'd to the devil's heart.
O, I have sicken'd at his blasphemy,
Applauding it and adding my own wit
(Which God forgive) to keep him in those ways.
He holds he hath a better tongue than Christ
To make men leave the dirt and stand upright;
And, lest he found a head to dupe indeed,
I as disciple swallowed all his teaching,
His crazy watchwords (how I spew them out)
Self-serving, self-delight, ay, and self-worship.
And madly he will give himself to stand
In fire until he chars to death, for hopes
Of startling all the unaware dark minds
To manfulness, with a new faith the world
Rumouring farther abroad than Galilee
And Olivet have gone about the mouths
Of nations, and are sacred in men's ears:

And flames perhaps look nobler than a cross.
God gave me cunning; and I swore to be
The preacher of his notions. He will die
Trusting his words to me. I swore besides
From Corinth to collect with choice a sage
Assembly of staid witnesses. For them
He waits, for them I have swept up
A ribald crowd of youths; well known to these
By fame is Peregrinus. I have said
That he will burn himself lest he should lose
(For he perceives men's ears grow tired of him)
His infamy, and come to an obscure end:
But openly, in concourse, he will set
The doors of death on fire, and burst a way
By flames through the forbiddance of his flesh,
And win great mention in the talk of feasts.
This—sport it is to them—they come to view
With glee unruly; yea, behold they come,
Less gentle pack than wolves, announced by wine
Upon the air, laughter and flown gibing,
The snarling happiness of cruel men.
How have men's mouths become so terrible?

CHORUS

Two here alone;
Have we been fooled, we are enough
To snatch the jest from these,
And with what merry injuries we please
Bind it on them.
'Tis like we shall be entertained
Whatever case befall.
When God sent down strict duties
To school His men, the kinder Devil sent
Pleasures in a gay troop;
Tunefully they dance over the heart;
And of them all the queen is Cruelty,
The subtlest, the least sensuous,

Keener than keen odours,
Fiercer than fierce wine in the brain,
Reaching into the life of us farther than love,
A rapture with no satisfaction in it,
Making the lungs gasp, forgetting to breathe,
And the heart stand still, trembling.
  But also it is gravely thought
That pleasures be indeed from God's hands
To be a means of climbing from the earth.
And not amiss that city would be judged
The princeliest, the nearest heaven,
Which had stept up all rungs of lower pleasures,
And had abandoned all the sorts of delight
For this amazement of the nerves,
This sharp delicious ransack of the brain,
This ravishing wild piracy of the soul,
Cruelty.
  This need not crawl laborious through a sense,
This hath no masterful appetites
Warily to serve, capricious gate-keepers,—
Now welcoming in pleasure to the mind
As high-birtht lady they are glad to see
Coming to cheer their lord,
Now shutting sulky doors
Before her entrance, calling her ill-names,
Saying they are sick,
Cannot rise to draw the bolts,
Nor would let her tempt
Their lord, the mind, to harlotry.
  But Cruelty hath no gates,
Nor qualmish porters in her way:
Though she get help from sense,—
For struggle, eyes,
Ears for cries,
Smelling when we use the fire,—
Yet in the main she is mere intelligence;
And a dull thing seemeth sense

And sensual delight,
To one who has let the exquisite
Passion of cruelty trouble his heart
To blithe laughter, and learnt
Skill in tormenting.
To me in warm love busied, or in cups,
A whisper came,
A quiet fame,
That Peregrinus would all willingly
Torture his living limbs with fire.
Then I arose from soft enjoyment,
From wine and lust and hours of scent,
To try the thinnest highest element
Delight can use for being, Cruelty;
Hail, Marcon, we are come,
Hail to thy crazed victim.
Pay us now our jest, this man's torment.

MAR. Mayhap I yet may use persuasion
On him. My master, Peregrinus there!
PER. Art eager then? art thou as ready as I?
MAR. The worshippers are come: they wait the priest.
PER. And soon the priest shall put on holy robes.
MAR. Not a soft weaving, such as loves the skin.
PER. But golden, but a glory, the wealth of flame.
MAR. Shall man not love his life, but prefer death?
PER. He shall love Self better than he loves life.
MAR. And yet thou say'st, death utterly scatters Self.
PER. Nothing it matters if that be or not.
MAR. How pleasant in the beating heart is life.
PER. But if a man hath left to rule his lusts,
Which are to teach him wonder only,—fed
And pamper'd them unwisely, till he knows
Beasts of desire are in him, bloated things,
And his imagination is no more
Than a byre full of moaning appetites,
And danger is that they may break out wild,

Root up and dung the orchard of his soul,
And in foul mischief plough it and stamp to mud,
And the lord Self be under maniac hoofs,—
Then better than such outrage is to die.

MAR. What gain to Self is that, if Self is murder'd?

PER. The gain of standing upright to the end.

MAR. Fixed, then, thou art to burn life out of thee?

PER. Yes, and to be the king of all my being.

MAR. O, but it is a dreadful way to death.

PER. The worse the pain, the kinglier am I.
Hast thou forgot, moreover, that this act
Is as an angel standing upon earth
Amid a burning secrecy of wings,
Summoning hearts to heed news out of Heaven?—
'Take care that no harm come, Man, to thy Self,
And death is better than to be defiled.'
I am to announce the holiness of Self;
I am the trumpet, but thou art the herald.

MAR. Stop, I will sit no more beside thy danger;
Burn thyself as thou wilt, but now at last
Know I detest, spit out, and fear thy doctrine,
As God does thee. Thou art the Devil's friend:
Burn now and to eternity. I am
A Christian.

PER. A slave. O lying tongue,
I half suspected this. Love thou thy malice,
I am not harmed. This serious company
Shall now proclaim my ending to the world.

CHORUS. He comes to speak. Look well for fear in him,
For that's the seasoning in a man's torment.

PER. O men, desire no great farewell of me.
I have strapt indeed a harness against fear
Upon me, but he shoots many arrows.
And there's no breast given as target to him
His sharp archery may not wound at length,
However forged about with the mind's brass.
Yet must I tell you why I burn myself.

Behold, the world and all the beings in it
A multitude of waves upon a sea.
But as a chance of flows and currents often
Seizes the watery substance into whirl,
And in the sea doth separately exist
That whirl, so is the kind of man in the world.
Or scatter a pool of quicksilver and see
How easily the drops are one again;
But if one drop have rolled among some dirt,
The skin it now hath keeps it out of the rest.
So is man's nature floating in the world,
Having acquired a dirt of strange desires
To keep him still unmixt with the one substance.
Take not too closely, though, that 'dirt': I mean
Only to nail upon your memories
This ruling word: how utterly apart
Man, by the Self he hath, is from the world.

CHORUS. What, is he teaching? Come, let's have some tales
Among ourselves.—It seems a well-built pyre.

PER. So then there is a new creature in the old
Draught of eternal flowing substance down
The spacious alley of the will of God,—
Gathered perplexity of substance, called
The Self of Man: and let it be a boat
Steered by strong wilful oars about the tide.
It is well said, Be good and love mankind;
But it is better said, Be beautiful
And love yourselves: for this contains the other.
How can you love what is not beautiful?
I would have each man passionately in love
With his own Self: see that it take no harm,
And let not the base breathing of the world,
The nuzzling friendship of such mouths as munch
Garbage, come tarnishing your silver thought.
The one sure thing in all the world is Self;
See that it be a Self worthy the having,
And namely one that is never satisfied

With its own excellence. I know a way
The kind of Man may be a holy kind,
And dress itself in beauty as the sun
Wears naturally, excellent in the heavens,
For self-delight his golden gear of virtue.
For none who love and honour their own selves
Would do the frauds, malices, sneakings, lies,
The huffing impudence and bragg'd lechery,
That cause the life of man to smear a scum
Over the world as if a sewer had burst.
But cease to stand about the swampy earth
And grieve to find the mud holding your ankles
When you would seek, following a light-foot dream,
The good firm land that has not been in storms
Of evil rain, nor been drowned nastily.
Follow no dreams; try not to mend the world,
But mend yourselves. Ye love unthriftily
God and your neighbour; call in your rambling love,
Ye need it all yourselves to shore your wills
From resting on the soft uncleanly sin.
When you have thus grown strong (and you shall find
Mercy the prop to make a soul most strong),
Then you shall join me in this mystery,
Self-worship, and not die (as I must do)
To enter it. For worship can make holy,
And man shall be a sacred thing at last
When difficultly he learns to be the priest
Of his own Self, lighting clean fires of worship
With every faculty of flesh and soul.
And henceforth in the world shall walk a ghost
With the appearance of blown fire, to haunt
The ease of men, and amaze them out of comfort.
For here I lift up to the world a token,
A burning type of high self-love, the world's
Instance of the self-worship's ritual.
I have sinned the unforgivable sin against
Myself, rendering body and mind unfit

To be inhabited by a sacred thing,
And profit ye thereby. For greatest wrong
Compels this greatest act of worship from me.
I made of my desires not ecstasy
But lust; as rooms of mere delight
I lived in passions, not seeing that they were
Porches only into wonder, and made
To be past through, but not inhabited.
And like a deadly climate they have grieved
And spoilt my nature, crept into my marrow,
And made intolerable wrong in my soul.
But I will not have myself so dismayed
Or with wild infamous handling hurt and pusht
From being throned. I come to burn myself.
And as I stand naked before the hot
Mouth of the hungry fire, and am devoured,—
As by its dreadful love I am enjoyed,
And have no being except pain until
Perfectly I become the mate of flame,
Then know that I with golden voice announce
And sound over the world from midst my bright
Rapture out of dishonourable life,
That henceforth in the hearts of men shall be
Their own worship: Self is the sacred thing.
Now let thy torches be prepared, Marcon.

CHORUS. Oft have I wisht
I had beheld the famous sport
The King of Egypt gave unto his court,
When she, the fairest of his wives,
Thinking she was not husbanded enough,
In action went the same way as her thought.
Her the king gave choice,—on swords to die,
Or else to have her face publicly
Tortured into hideousness.
And joy ran down the anxious streets
When the king let cry amid blown horns
His mercy, that her beauty should be murder'd,

But she might keep her life.
They say the thing went happily:
It might have been a panther
Beneath the struggled men,
So spat and yelled the lady,
Bit and scratched, butted and kickt,
Tore at the irons and shook hands with burning
To save a little of her look;
After, when the heat-loosen'd flesh set firm,
Her lips were ludicrously writhed.
But this thing promises a greater joke
Than that Egyptian quip.
And after this I think I shall not wish so much
That I had seen her face,
Her undelighted grin,
When first they trapt her visage in a gin
Of white-hot wires and were ingenious
To screw with branding her neck-sinews
Into a rigid wrying tackle,
And the smoke of her own flesh was tangled in her hair.

PER. Friends, friends, good friends, it was a jest.

CHORUS. Now it begins; now mark him well, dear souls.

PER. What fool hath taken the ladder? Bring it back.

CHORUS. You see, 'tis as the wise heads say. A beast
But gives, howe'er elaborately killed,
A single pleasure. But a man gives twain,—
Both killing and ridiculous fear of death.

PER. The ladder, Marcon; dear Marcon, bring me the ladder.
What art thou doing with that torch, thou fool?
Keep off, take care of all those flying sparks,
Stamp it into the sand;—no, no, good Marcon,
Bring it not near the faggots, see how it spits
Hot resin. Hold it away, curst fool, away.—
You there, Corinthians, hold that murderous man;
Bind him, throttle him, friends, and let me down.

CHORUS. This is the best: on us he calls to save.

PER. Have ye not had enow of jest? and more

Will come; hereafter I will make myself
Your banquet's laughing stock, the clown of feasts,
But only let me down.—I will not die.

CHORUS. Thou wilt not die! Fool, dost thou think we have left
Our night's pursuits, and will not see thee die?
Marcon, light thou the pyre, or we will hurl
Thee into it, and burn the pair of you.

PER. Ah,—now I see what bloody men ye are;
And I must die mockt at by such a herd,
And they will make a jest of me over the world,
No honourable report. Marcon, too,
Forswears his part; into what strange darkness
Has been betrayed the shining of my death?—
That would have been a medicine for all minds
Enfeebled with the bane of help from Heaven,
And roused them from the pallets of sick ease
Which self-mistrust, that priestly surgery,
Drove them to lie on; but not now, not now
I burn myself, like hyssop, for the world.
What then? Why, it is as it should be now.
For now privately I shall do my worship
And have my own approval, no stared applause,
Far better rite. To my own holiness,
To my Self, is all my being sacrificed:
I am the Champion against my own wrong.
Marcon, my heart is braced; yare with thy fires.

CHORUS. Little flames, merry flames, modest low chucklings,
This is but maidenly pretence of shyness;
Little flames, happy flames, what are these secrets
You so modestly whisper one another?
Do we not know your golden desires,
And the brave way you tower into lust
Mightily shameless?
Why do you inly skulk among the timber?
Stand up, yellow flames, take the joy given you;
Resins and spunkwood, faggots and turpentine,
A deal of spices, a great cost of benzoin,

Everything proper for your riot, O flames.
Leap up the bavins,
Run up these joys we have built like a stair for you;
Fuel lies topmost waiting your frenzy
Better than sap, better than tar,
For you to kindle.
'Tis flesh and blood, life and feeling,
Desperate moisture besieged by your heat,
Silly resistance to your golden desires,
Agony wrestling with pitiless glee,
Mad Peregrinus;
Rarely delightful to you, I guess.
Ha, didst hear?
A cry, like a frightened bird, flew out,
But sudden it stopt, as a hunter
Shot the wild flight.
Flames, flames, rejoice, ye have found him!
Up with you now, stroke him first and singe him gently,
Call out some vagaries from him,
And then take hold of the man
And tie his soul up in torment.
Ah, but I wish I could be as flames are;
No more deal in such peddlings of desire
As senses cheaply buy,
But quite become desire
As you do, flames.

MAR. Now I have done good service to the Lord
With my false friendship; for the man is gone
And his hugg'd wickedness along with him
To be unseen, and no more to God's eyes
Hateful, smother'd beyond all offending
In violent places full of the old worm.
O flame, O nature prosperous for the Lord,
O captain over the angers of just Heaven,
Have now thy hottest, holiest zeal, and turn
The mercy of the air to indignation.
Slacken not thou from whiteness, be not red

Nor even gold, but white and terribly white,
The utter purity thou hadst from God
When he began to war. Be fiercely good,
Till thou hast lickt this evil up, and made him
Flakes of fire in the night. But thou, O Lord,
Let me be pleasant and delightful to thee;
Forget not me, if I have served thee here.
And thou, blue-kirtled Mary, who on earth
Didst nourish God, an infancy of flesh
Taking the simple milk of thy dear breast
Instead of spiritual thrones adoring;
When he, thy Son, down to his promist judgement
Rides out of Heaven upon Eternity
Harnest under his hands, and with one stroke
Of wielded holiness on this clotted nature
Breaks up mortality and turns to ghost
The whole fixt starry creature of the world,
An universal Easter of all being,
Mary, look that I come into the light.

CHORUS. Did the much-wander'd Peregrinus—
Or the much-lying ('tis the same)—
Say ever he had seen the Phœnix burning?
Into those brave tales of his,—
The hairy giants who desired him for meat,
The Northern dragons that he slew,
And showed the tooth of one,
(But that, I have heard, came from an alligartha's jaws:
He found it dead and rotting once,
And fought with nothing fiercer than a stink,)—
Into those excellent impudences
Surely the Phœnix came,
Shrieking as the flames tired upon her,
And all the Arabian air
Full of the messages of burning myrrh?
For methinks he would be making now
An image of such vision.

But when these ashes whiten,

Will a famous ghost spring out,
Spurning the glow-hearted logs
Till into sparks they lighten,
A more perpetual life?
Ay, in immortal laughter,
Like a beetle overcome in amber,
We will catch his ghost.
See, thou crazy ghost,
Lovingly we have limed thee
In imperishable gum of merriment,
Tomb thou never shalt escape.
At many a feast, when chaplets are awry
And tipsy spilth is wasting half the wine
And all the lanterns sway,
Thou shalt be handed round and praised
More than Atlantic pearl or topaz out of Meroë,
Thou precious ghost, safe from time
In a clear sepulchre of laughter.
Ah! Ah!
How greatly flared the pyre,
With what a roar its framework fell,
The scaffolding all loosed with fire.
Did see, my friends, that neck of flame
Leap from these ended agonies?
There is a crimson dazzle in my eyes;
Was there not a mighty swag of smoke
Like, most like, a big unnatural bat?
It was over us, with sparkling eyes,
And large hollow wings outspread;
Did they not flap heavily
Like wings of a demon huge vampire
Bloated with sleepy blood?
Did it not hiss and scream?—
Or was it moisture of a pine made steam
And forcing through the wood?
'Tis likely, for as I lookt again
Nothing was there to abash the stars,

And all quite vain
Of smoke the golden flames did spire.
Well, we will take thy lesson,
As near as we can get to it.
The world is a muddy place,
Mankind is an unpleasant race;
What shall we do with our time here?
There is no good answer at all,
Save this, the thing of most delight,
For which all, except fools, must fight,
Is to be known and pointed out in the street.
Fame must be bought at any price,—
Folly, ignomy, or vice,
It matters not, so fame is bought.
And better it is to die as thou hast done
Than to live unknown.

MAR. O stop this foolish noise, you murderers,
For such you are who swarmed to this affair
Merely to see him die, and would not help him.
CHORUS. Look at this angry man. Who was it told
The city of this jest? And didst thou help?
MAR. I let him die because—you will not take me—
His thoughts burnt like wicked sulphur, and spoilt
God's pleasure in the fragrant prayers of saints.
CHORUS. And how did his burning flesh smell to thy god?
Agreeably to his nose?
MAR. Peace, insolent mouth.
CHORUS. But why should Peregrinus burn himself?
MAR. Because he thought to loose over the earth
Widely a running blasphemy, and dip
Men's thoughts in his, as in a vat of brimstone.
CHORUS. But this is wild talk. Did he not die for fame?
MAR. Not as you think. But, friends, I would not have
This thing much known; tell it not commonly.
SEMI-CHORUS. The world shall hear, the world shall laugh,
And he who paints with nimblest fancy

What on the top was hid,
How flame and smoke leapt down his throat and tore
His inwards with convulsing storm,
The hideous end of his vain life,
He shall most jocular hearers find,
Raise the merriest laughter.
And if this Marcon spread abroad
Any of this notion,
That Peregrinus had some other purpose
Than a mere craze for infamy
So dying in this manner,
He shall be laught to scorn and for a fool
Pointed at by mockers.

CHORUS. In olden times they held it was the gods
Plagued to madness such as he
Who sought with shouted fame
To make the world his temple;
And, though now we have no gods,
Strangeness visits still brains of men,
As shooting-stars furrow clear skies
Into unusual lights.
But what care whence it comes?
For being here, good it is for laughter.
It is unwise to question,
But it is very wise to laugh;
Behold, gone is Peregrinus,
Of his mad death only a smoulder left.
Now never was there in the world a game
So merry as this ravishing
Death of Peregrinus.

THE
SALE OF SAINT THOMAS

TO

ARTHUR RANSOME

MY FRIEND

The Tradition

When, for the gospelling of the world, the Apostles sorted the countries among themselves, the lot of India fell to Thomas. After some hesitations, he obeyed the lot, being shamed thereto by his Master, as is here set forth.

THE SALE OF SAINT THOMAS

A Quay, with vessels moored

THOMAS

To India! Yea, here I may take ship;
From here the courses go over the seas,
Along which the intent prows wonderfully
Nose like lean hounds, and track their journeys out,
Making for harbours as some sleuth was laid
For them to follow on their shifting road.
Again I front my appointed ministry.—
But why the Indian lot to me? Why mine
Such fearful gospelling? For the Lord knew
What a frail soul he gave me, and a heart
Lame and unlikely for the large events.—
And this is worse than Baghdad! though that was
A fearful brink of travel. But if the lots,
That gave to me the Indian duty, were
Shuffled by the unseen skill of Heaven, surely
That fear of mine in Baghdad was the same
Marvellous Hand working again, to guard
The landward gate of India from me. There
I stood, waiting in the weak early dawn
To start my journey; the great caravan's
Strange cattle with their snoring breaths made steam
Upon the air, and (as I thought) sadly
The beasts at market-booths and awnings gay
Of shops, the city's comfortable trade,
Lookt, and then into months of plodding lookt.
And swiftly on my brain there came a wind
Of vision; and I saw the road mapt out
Along the desert with a chalk of bones;
I saw a famine and the Afghan greed
Waiting for us, spears at our throats, all we

Made women by our hunger; and I saw
Gigantic thirst grieving our mouths with dust,
Scattering up against our breathing salt
Of blown dried dung, till the taste eat like fires
Of a wild vinegar into our sheathèd marrows;
And a sudden decay thicken'd all our bloods
As rotten leaves in fall will baulk a stream;
Then my kill'd life the muncht food of jackals.—
The wind of vision died in my brain; and lo,
The jangling of the caravan's long gait
Was small as the luting of a breeze in grass
Upon my ears. Into the waiting thirst
Camels and merchants all were gone, while I
Had been in my amazement. Was this not
A sign? God with a vision tript me, lest
Those tall fiends that ken for my approach
In middle Asia, Thirst and his grisly band
Of plagues, should with their brigand fingers stop
His message in my mouth. Therefore I said,
If India is the place where I must preach,
I am to go by ship, not overland.

And here my ship is berthed. But worse, far worse
Than Baghdad, is this roadstead, the brown sails,
All the enginery of going on sea,
The tackle and the rigging, tholes and sweeps,
The prows built to put by the waves, the masts
Stayed for a hurricane; and lo, that line
Of gilded water there! the sun has drawn
In a long narrow band of shining oil
His light over the sea; how evilly move
Ripples along that golden skin!—the gleam
Works like a muscular thing! like the half-gorged
Sleepy swallowing of a serpent's neck.
The sea lives, surely! My eyes swear to it;
And, like a murderous smile that glimpses through
A villain's courtesy, that twitching dazzle
Parts the kind mood of weather to bewray

The feasted waters of the sea, stretched out
In lazy gluttony, expecting prey.
How fearful is this trade of sailing! Worse
Than all land-evils is the water-way
Before me now.—What, cowardice? Nay, why
Trouble myself with ugly words? 'Tis prudence,
And prudence is an admirable thing.
Yet here 's much cost,—these packages piled up,
Ivory doubtless, emeralds, gums, and silks,
All these they trust on shipboard?—Ah, but I,
I who have seen God, I to put myself
Amid the heathen outrage of the sea
In a deal-wood box! It were plain folly.
There is naught more precious in the world than I:
I carry God in me, to give to men.
And when has the sea been friendly unto man?
Let it but guess my errand, it will call
The dangers of the air to wreak upon me,
Winds to juggle the puny boat and pinch
The water into unbelievable creases.
And shall my soul, and God in my soul, drown?
Or venture drowning?—But no, no; I am safe.
Smooth as believing souls over their deaths
And over agonies shall slide henceforth
To God, so shall my way be blest amid
The quiet crouching terrors of the sea,
Like panthers when a fire weakens their hearts;
Ay, this huge sin of nature, the salt sea,
Shall be afraid of me, and of the mind
Within me, that with gesture, speech, and eyes
Of the Messiah flames. What element
Dare snarl against my going, what incubus dare
Remember to be fiendish, when I light
My whole being with memory of Him?
The malice of the sea will slink from me,
And the air be harmless as a muzzled wolf;
For I am a torch, and the flame of me is God.

A SHIP'S CAPTAIN

You are my man, my passenger?

THOMAS. I am.

I go to India with you.

CAPTAIN. Well, I hope so.

There's threatening in the weather. Have you a mind
To hug your belly to the slanted deck,
Like a louse on a whip-top, when the boat
Spins on an axle in the hissing gales?

THOMAS. Fear not. 'Tis likely indeed that storms are now
Plotting against our voyage; ay, no doubt
The very bottom of the sea prepares
To stand up mountainous or reach a limb
Out of his night of water and huge shingles,
That he and the waves may break our keel. Fear not;
Like those who manage horses, I've a word
Will fasten up within their evil natures
The meanings of the winds and waves and reefs.

CAPTAIN. You have a talisman? I have one too;
I know not if the storms think much of it.
I may be shark's meat yet. And would your spell
Be daunting to a cuttle, think you now?
We had a bout with one on our way here;
It had green lidless eyes like lanterns, arms
As many as the branches of a tree,
But limber, and each one of them wise as a snake.
It laid hold of our bulwarks, and with three
Long knowing arms, slimy, and of a flesh
So tough they 'ld fool a hatchet, searcht the ship,
And stole out of the midst of us all a man;
Yes, and he the proudest man upon the seas
For the rare powerful talisman he 'd got.
And would yours have done better?

THOMAS. I am one
Not easily frightened. I'm for India.
You will not put me from my way with talk.

CAPTAIN. My heart, I never thought of frightening you.—

Well, here's both tide and wind, and we may not start.
THOMAS. Not start? I pray you, do.
CAPTAIN. It's no use praying;
I dare not. I've not half my cargo yet.
THOMAS. What do you wait for, then?
CAPTAIN. A carpenter.
THOMAS. You are talking strangely.
CAPTAIN. But not idly.
I might as well broach all my blood at once
Here as I stand, as sail to India back
Without a carpenter on board;—O strangely
Wise are our kings in the killing of men!
THOMAS. But does your king then need a carpenter?
CAPTAIN. Yes, for he dreamed a dream; and like a man
Who, having eaten poison, and with all
Force of his life turned out the crazing drug,
Has only a weak and wrestled nature left
That gives in foolishly to some bad desire
A healthy man would laugh at; so our king
Is left desiring by his venomous dream.
But, being a king, the whole land aches with him.
THOMAS. What dream was that?
CAPTAIN. A palace made of souls;—
Ay, there's a folly for a man to dream!
He saw a palace covering all the land,
Big as the day itself, made of a stone
That answered with a better gleam than glass
To the sun's greeting, fashioned like the sound
Of laughter copied into shining shape:
So the king said. And with him in the dream
There was a voice that fleered upon the king:
'This is the man who makes much of himself
For filling the common eyes with palaces
Gorgeously bragging out his royalty:
Whereas he hath not one that seemeth not
In work, in height, in posture on the ground,
A hut, a peasant's dingy shed, to mine.

And all his excellent woods, metals, and stones,
The things he 's filcht out of the earth's old pockets
And hoised up into walls and domes; the gold,
Ebony, agate stairs, wainscots of jade,
The windows of jargoon, and heavenly lofts
Of marble, all the stuff he takes to be wealth,
Reckons like savage mud and wattle against
The matter of my building.'—And the king,
Gloating upon the white sheen of that palace,
And weeping like a girl ashamed, required
'What is that stone?' And the voice answered him,
'Soul.' 'But in my palaces too,' said he,
'There should be soul built: I have driven nations,
What with quarrying, what with craning, down
To death, and sure their souls stay in my work.'
And, 'Mud and wattle' sneered the voice again;
But added, 'In the west there is a man,
A slave, a carpenter, whose heart has been
Apprenticed to the skill that built my reign,
This beauty; and were he master of your gangs,
He'ld build you a palace that would look like mine.'—
So now no ship may sail from India,
Since the king's scornful dream, unless it bring
A carpenter among its homeward lading:
And carpenters are getting hard to find.

THOMAS. And have none made for the king his desire?

CAPTAIN. Many have tried, with roasting living men
In queer huge kilns, and other sleights, to found
A glass of human souls; and others seek
With marvellous stone to please our desperate king.
Always at last their own tormented bodies
Delight the cruelty of the king's heart.

THOMAS. Well, then, I hope you'll find your carpenter,
And soon. I would not that we wait too long;
I loathe a dallying journey.—I should suppose
We'ld have good sailing at this season, now?

CAPTAIN. Why, you were looking, a few minutes gone,

For rare wild storms: I hope we'll have them too;
I want to see you work that talisman
You boast about: I've a great love for spells.

THOMAS. Let it be storm or calm, so we be sailing.
I long have wisht to voyage into mid sea,
To give my senses rest from wondering
On this perplexèd grammar of the land
Written in men and women, the strange trees,
Herbs, and those things so like to souls, the beasts.
My wilful senses will keep perilously
Employed with these my brain, and weary it
Still to be asking. But on the high seas
Such throng'd reality is left behind,—
Only vast air and water, and the hue
That always seems like special news of God.
Surely 'tis half way to eternity
To go where only size and colour live;
And I could purify my mind from all
Worldly amazement by imagining
Beyond my senses into God's great Heaven,
If I were in mid sea. I have dreamed of this.
Wondrous too, I think, to sail at night,
While shoals of moonlight flickers dance beside,
Like swimming glee of fishes scaled in gold,
Curvetting in thwart bounds over the swell;
The perceiving flesh, in bliss of such a beauty,
Must sure feel fine as spiritual sight.—
Moods have been on me, too, when I would be
Sailing recklessly through wild darkness, where
Gigantic whispers of a harasst sea
Fill the whole world of air, and I stand up
To breast the danger of the loosen'd sky,
And feel my immortality like music,—
Yea, I alone in the broken world, firm things
All gone to monstrous flurry, knowing myself
An indestructible word spoken by God.—
This is a small, small boat?

CAPTAIN. Small is nothing,
A bucket will do, so it know how to ride
Top upward: cleverness is the thing in boats.
And I wish this were cleverer: she goes crank
At times just when she should go sober most.
But what? Boats are but girls for whimsies: men
Must let them have their freaks.
THOMAS. Have you good skill
In seamanship?
CAPTAIN. Well, I am not drowned yet,
Though I'm a grey man and have been at sea
Longer than you've been walking. My old sight
Can tell Mizar from Alcor still.
THOMAS. Ay, so;
Doubtless you'll bring me safe to India.
But being there—tell me now of the land:
How use they strangers there?
CAPTAIN. Queerly, sometimes.
If the king's moody, and tired of feeling nerves
Mildly made happy with soft jewel of silk,
Odours and wines and slim lascivious girls,
And yearns for sharper thrills to pierce his brain,
He often finds a stranger handy then.
THOMAS. Why, what do you mean?
CAPTAIN. There was a merchant came
To Travancore, and could not speak our talk;
And, it chanced, he was brought before the throne
Just when the king was weary of sweet pleasures.
So, to better his tongue, a rope was bent
Beneath his oxters, up he was hauled, and fire
Let singe the soles of his feet, until his legs
Wriggled like frying eels; then the king's dogs
Were sent to hunt the hirpling man. The king
Laught greatly and cried, 'But give the dogs words they know,
And they'll be tame.'—Have you the Indian speech?
THOMAS. Not yet: it will be given me, I trust.

CAPTAIN. You'd best make sure of the gift. Another stranger,
Who swore he knew of better gods than ours,
Seemed to the king troubled with fleas, and slaves
Were told to groom him smartly, which they did
Thoroughly with steel combs, until at last
They curried the living flesh from off his bones
And stript his face of gristle, till he was
Skull and half skeleton and yet alive.
You're not for dealing in new gods?

THOMAS. Not I.
Was the man killed?

CAPTAIN. He lived a little while;
But the flies killed him.

THOMAS. Flies? I hope India
Is not a fly-plagued land? I abhor flies.

CAPTAIN. You will see strange ones, for our Indian life
Hath wonderful fierce breeding. Common earth
With us quickens to buzzing flights of wings
As readily as a week-old carcase here
Thrown in a sunny marsh. Why, we have wasps
That make your hornets seem like pretty midges;
And there be flies in India will drink
Not only blood of bulls, tigers, and bears,
But pierce the river-horses' creasy leather,
Ay, worry crocodiles through their cuirasses
And prick the metal fishes when they bask.
You'll feel them soon, with beaks like sturdy pins,
Treating their stinging thirst with your best blood.
A man can't walk a mile in India
Without being the business of a throng'd
And moving town of flies: they hawk at a man
As bold as little eagles, and as wild.
And, I suppose, only a fool will blame them.
Flies have the right to sink wells in our skin
All as men to bore parcht earth for water.
But I must do a job on board, and then
Search the town afresh for a carpenter.

THOMAS [*alone*]. Ay, loose tongue, I know how thou art prompted.
Satan's cunning device thou art, to sap
My heart with chatter'd fears. How easy it is
For a stiff mind to hold itself upright
Against the cords of devilish suggestion
Tackled about it, though kept downward strained
With sly, masterful winches made of fear.
Yea, when the mind is warned what engines mean
To ply it into grovelling, and thought set firm,
The tugging strings fail like a cobweb-stuff.
Not as in Baghdad is it with me now;
Nor canst thou, Satan, by a prating mouth
Fell my tall purpose to a flatlong scorn.
I can divide the check of God's own hand
From tempting such as this: India is mine!—
Ay, fiend, and if thou utter thy storming heart
Into the ocean sea, as into mob
A rebel utters turbulence and rage,
And raise before my path swelling barriers
Of hatred soul'd in water, yet will I strike
My purpose, and God's purpose, clean through all
The ridges of thy power. And I will show
This mask that the devil wears, this old shipman,
A thing to make his proud heart of evil
Writhe like a trodden snake; yea, he shall see
How godly faith can go upon the huge
Fury of forces bursting out of law,
Easily as a boy goes on windy grass.—
O marvel! that my little life of mind
Can by mere thinking the unsizeable
Creature of sea enslave! I must believe it.
The mind hath many powers beyond name
Deep womb'd within it, and can shoot strange vigours:
Men there have been who could so grimly look
That soldiers' hearts went out like candle flames
Before their eyes, and the blood perisht in them.—

But I—could I do that? Would I not feel
The power in me if 't was there? And yet
'Twere a child's game to what I have to do,
For days and days with sleepless faith oppress
And terrorize the demon sea. I think
A man might, as I saw my Master once,
Pass unharmed through a storm of men, yet fail
At this that lies before me: men are mind,
And mind can conquer mind; but how can it quell
The unappointed purpose of great waters?—
Well, say the sea is past: why, then I have
My feet but on the threshold of my task,
To gospel India,—my single heart
To seize into the order of its beat
All the strange blood of India, my brain
To lord the dark thought of that tann'd mankind!—
O, horrible those sweltry places are,
Where the sun comes so close, it makes the earth
Burn in a frenzy of breeding,—smoke and flame
Of lives burning up from agoniz'd loam!
Those monstrous sappy jungles of clutcht growth,
Enormous weed hugging enormous weed,
What can such fearful increase have to do
With prospering bounty? A rage works in the ground,
Incurably, like frantic lechery,
Pouring its passion out in crops and spawns.
'Tis as the mighty spirit of life, that here
Walketh beautifully praising, glad of God,
Should, stepping on the poison'd Indian shore,
Breathing the Indian air of fire and steams,
Fling herself into a craze of hideous dancing,
The green gown whipping her swift limbs, all her body
Writhen to speak inutterable desire,
Tormented by a glee of hating God.
Nay, it must be, to visit India,
That frantic pomp and hurrying forth of life,
As if a man should enter at unawares

The dreaming mind of Satan, gorgeously
Imagining his eternal hell of lust.—
They say the land is full of apes, which have
Their own gods and worship; how ghastly, this!—
That demons (for it must be so) should build,
In mockery of man's upward faith, the souls
Of monkeys, those lewd mammets of mankind,
Into a dreadful farce of adoration!
And flies! a land of flies! where the hot soil
Foul with ceaseless decay steams into flies!
So thick they pile themselves in the air above
Their meal of filth, they seem like breathing heaps
Of formless life mounded upon the earth;
And buzzing always like the pipes and strings
Of solemn music made for sorcerers.—
I abhor flies,—to see them stare upon me
Out of their little faces of gibbous eyes;
To feel the dry cool skin of their bodies alight
Perching upon my lips!—O yea, a dream,
A dream of impious obscene Satan, this
Monstrous frenzy of life, the Indian being!
And there are men in the dream! What men are they?
I've heard, naught relishes their brains so much
As to tie down a man and teaze his flesh
Infamously, until a hundred pains
Hound the desiring life out of his body,
Filling his nerves with such a fearful zest
That the soul overstrained shatters beneath it.
Must I preach God to these murderous hearts?
I would my lot had fallen to go and dare
Death from the silent dealing of Northern cold!—
O, but I would face all these Indian fears,
The horror of the huge power of life,
The beasts all fierce and venomous, the men
With cruel souls, learned to invent pain,
All these and more, if I had any hope
That, braving them, Lord Christ prosper'd through me.

If Christ desired India, he had sent
The band of us, solder'd in one great purpose,
To strike his message through those dark vast tribes.
But one man!—O surely it is folly,
And we misread the lot! One man, to thrust,
Even though in his soul the lamp was kindled
At God's own hands, one man's lit soul to thrust
The immense Indian darkness out of the world!
For human flesh there breeds as furiously
As the green things and the cattle; and it is all,
All this enormity of measureless folk,
Penn'd in a land so close to the devil's reign
The very apes have faith in him.—No, no:
Impetuous brains mistake the signs of God
Too easily. God would not have me waste
My zeal for him in this wild enterprise,
Of going alone to swarming India;—one man,
One mortal voice, to charm those myriad ears
Away from the fiendish clamour of Indian gods,
One man preaching the truth against the huge
Bray of the gongs and horns of the Indian priests!
A cup of wine poured in the sea were not
More surely lost in the green and brackish depths,
Than the fire and fragrance of my doctrine poured
Into that multitudinous pond of men,
India.—Shipman! Master of the ship!—
I have thought better of this journey; now
I find I am not meant to go.

CAPTAIN. Not meant?

THOMAS. I would say, I had forgotten Indian air
Is full of fevers; and my health is bad
For holding out against fever.

CAPTAIN. As you please.
I keep your fare, though.

THOMAS. O, 'tis yours.—Good sailing!

[*As he makes to depart, a Noble Stranger is seen approaching along the quay.*]

CAPTAIN. Well, here's a marvel: 'tis a king, for sure!
'Twould take the taxes of a world to dress
A man in that silken gold, and all those gems.
What a flash the light makes of him; nay, he burns;
And he's here on the quay all by himself,
Not even a slave to fan him!—Man, you're ailing!
You look like death; is it the falling sickness?
Or has the mere thought of the Indian journey
Made your marrow quail with a cold fever?

THE STRANGER [*to the Captain*]
You are the master of this ship?
CAPTAIN. I am.
STRANGER. This huddled man belongs to me: a slave
Escaped my service.
CAPTAIN. Lord, I knew not that.
But you are in good time.
STRANGER. And was the slave
For putting out with you? Where are you bound?
CAPTAIN. To India. First he would sail, and then
Again he would not. But, my Lord, I swear
I never guesst he was a runaway.
STRANGER. Well, he shall have his mind and go with you
To India: a good slave he is, but bears
A restless thought. He has slipt off before,
And vexes me still to be watching him.
We'll make a bargain of him.
CAPTAIN. I, my lord?
I have no need of slaves: I am too poor.
STRANGER. For twenty silver pieces he is yours.
CAPTAIN. That's cheap, if he has skill. Yes, there might be
Profit in him at that. Has he a trade?
STRANGER. He is a carpenter.
CAPTAIN. A carpenter!
Why, for a good one I'ld give all my purse.
STRANGER. No, twenty silver pieces is the price;
Though 'tis a slave a king might joy to own.

I've taught him to imagine palaces
So high, and tower'd so nobly, they might seem
The marvelling of a God-delighted heart
Escaping into ecstasy; he knows,
Moreover, of a stuff so rare it makes
Smaragdus and the dragon-stone despised;
And yet the quarries whereof he is wise
Would yield enough to house the tribes of the world
In palaces of beautiful shining work.

CAPTAIN. Lo there! why, that is it: the carpenter
I am to bring is needed for to build
The king's new palace.

STRANGER. Yea? He is your man.

CAPTAIN. Come on, my man. I'll put your cunning heels
Where they'll not budge more than a shuffled inch.
My lord, if you'll bide with the rascal here
I'll get the irons ready. Here's your sum.—

STRANGER. Now, Thomas, know thy sin. It was not fear;
Easily may a man crouch down for fear,
And yet rise up on firmer knees, and face
The hailing storm of the world with graver courage.
But prudence, prudence is the deadly sin,
And one that groweth deep into a life,
With hardening roots that clutch about the breast.
For this refuses faith in the unknown powers
Within man's nature; shrewdly bringeth all
Their inspiration of strange eagerness
To a judgment bought by safe experience;
Narrows desire into the scope of thought.
But it is written in the heart of man,
Thou shalt no larger be than thy desire.
Thou must not therefore stoop thy spirit's sight
To pore only within the candle-gleam
Of conscious wit and reasonable brain;
But search into the sacred darkness lying
Outside thy knowledge of thyself, the vast
Measureless fate, full of the power of stars,

The outer noiseless heavens of thy soul.
Keep thy desire closed in the room of light
The labouring fires of thy mind have made,
And thou shalt find the vision of thy spirit
Pitifully dazzled to so shrunk a ken,
There are no spacious puissances about it.
But send desire often forth to scan
The immense night which is thy greater soul;
Knowing the possible, see thou try beyond it
Into impossible things, unlikely ends;
And thou shalt find thy knowledgeable desire
Grow large as all the regions of thy soul,
Whose firmament doth cover the whole of Being,
And of created purpose reach the ends.

EMBLEMS OF LOVE

TO
MY WIFE

HYMN TO LOVE

We are thine, O Love, being in thee and made of thee,
As thóu, Lóve, were the déep thóught
And we the speech of the thought; yea, spoken are we,
Thy fires of thought out-spoken:

But burn'd not through us thy imagining
Like fiérce móod in a sóng cáught,
We were as clamour'd words a fool may fling,
Loose words, of meaning broken.

For what more like the brainless speech of a fool,—
The lives travelling dark fears,
And as a boy throws pebbles in a pool
Thrown down abysmal places?

Hazardous are the stars, yet is our birth
And our journeying time theirs;
As words of air, life makes of starry earth
Sweet soul-delighted faces;

As voices are we in the worldly wind;
The great wind of the world's fate
Is turned, as air to a shapen sound, to mind
And marvellous desires.

But not in the world as voices storm-shatter'd,
Not borne down by the wind's weight;
The rushing time rings with our splendid word
Like darkness filled with fires.

For Love doth use us for a sound of song,
And Love's meaning our life wields,
Making our souls like syllables to throng
His tunes of exultation.

Down the blind speed of a fatal world we fly,
  As rain blown along earth's fields;
Yet are we god-desiring liturgy,
    Sung joys of adoration;

Yea, made of chance and all a labouring strife,
  We go charged with a strong flame;
For as a language Love hath seized on life
    His burning heart to story.

Yea, Love, we are thine, the liturgy of thee,
  Thy thought's golden and glad name,
The mortal conscience of immortal glee,
    Love's zeal in Love's own glory.

PART I

DISCOVERY AND PROPHECY

PRELUDE

Night on bleak downs; a high grass-grown trench runs athwart the slope. The earthwork is manned by warriors clad in hides. Two warriors, Brys and Gast, talking.

GAST. This puts a tall heart in me, and a tune
Of great glad blood flowing brave in my flesh,
To see thee, after all these moons, returned,
My Brys. If there 's no rust in thy shoulder-joints,
That battle-wrath of thine, and thy good throwing,
Will be more help for us than if the dyke
Were higher by a span.—Ha! there was howling
Down in the thicket; they come soon, for sure.

BRYS. Has there been hunger in the forest long?

GAST. I think, not only hunger makes them fierce:
They broke not long since into a village yonder,
A huge throng of them; all through the night we heard
The feasting they kept up. And that has made
The wolves blood-thirsty, I believe.

BRYS. O fools
To keep so slack a waking on their dykes!
Now have they made a sleepless winter for us.
Every night we must look, lest the down-slope
Between us and the woods turn suddenly
To a grey onrush full of small green candles,
The charging pack with eyes flaming for flesh.
And well for us then if there 's no more mist
Than the white panting of the wolfish hunger.

GAST. They'll come to-night. Three of us hunting went
Among the trees below: not long we stayed.
All the wolves of the world are in the forest,
And man 's the meat they're after.

BRYS. Ay, it must be
Blood-thirst is in them, if they come to-night,
Such clear and starry weather.—What dost thou make,
Gast, of the stars?

GAST. Brother, they're horrible.
I always keep my head as much as I may
Bent so they cannot look me in the eyes.

BRYS. I never had this awe. The fear I have
Is not a load I crouch beneath, but something
Proud and wonderful, that lifteth my heart.
Yea, I look on a night of stars with fear
That comes close against glee. 'Tis like the fear
I have for the wolves, that maketh me joy-mad
To drive the yellow flint-edge through their shags.
So when I gaze on stars, they speak high fear
Into my soul; and strangely I think they mean
The fear must prompt me to some unknown war.

GAST. Be thou well ware of this. I have not told thee
How the stars, with their perilous overlooking,
Have raught away from all his manhood Gwat,
Our fiercest strength. For when the conquering wolves
Into that village won, we in our huts
Lay hearkening to their rejoicing hunger;
But Gwat stayed out in the stars all night long.
I peered at him as much as that whipt dog,
My heart, had daring for; and he stood stiff,
With all his senses aiming at the noise.
Some strong bad eagerness kept tightly rigged
The cordage of his body, till his nerves
Loosed on a sudden. He yelled, 'What do we here,
High up among bleak winds, always afraid
Of murder from the wolves? I will be man
No more; the grey four-footed fellows have
The good meats of the world, and the best lodging,
Forest and weald.' And then he wolfish howled,
And hurled off towards the snarling and the baying.
And now his soul wears the strength and fury

Of a huge dun-pelted wolf; he 's the wolves' king;
And the fiends have learnt from him to laugh at our flints.
Now always in the assaults there 's one great beast,
With yellow eyes and hackles like a mane,
That plays the captain, first to reach the dyke;
And I have heard that when he stands upright
To ramp against the bulwarks, in his throat
Are chattering yelps half tongued to grisly words.
Doubtless to-night thou'lt see him, leading his pack,
And with his jaws savagely tampering
With our earth-builded safety.—But now, Brys,
Is it not certain that the stars have done
This evil to Gwat's heart, and curdled all
The manhood in him?

BRYS. When I was wanderer,
I came upon a lake, set in a land
Which has no fear of wolves. A fisher folk
Live there in houses stilted over the water,
And the stars walk like spectres of white fire
Upon the misty waters of the mere.
Ay, if they have no wolves, they have the fear
All as thou hast; the sedges in the night
Shudder, and out of the reeds there comes a cry
Half chuckling, half bewailing; but, as I think,
It is the mallard calling. Now among
This haunted folk, I markt a man who went
With shining eyes, and a joy in his face, about
His needs of living. Clear it was to me
He knew of some sweet race in his daily wont
Which blest him wonderly. I lived with him,
And from him learnt marvels. Yea, for he gave me
A wit to see in our earth more than fear.
Brother, how shall I tell thee, who hast still
Fear-poisoned nerves, that like a priest he brewed
My heart keen drink from out the look of earth?—
Gast, is it nothing to thee that all in green
The wolds go heaping up against the blue?

And is it only fear to thee that night
Is thatched with stars?—Ah, but I took his wit
Further than he e'er did; in women I found
The same amazement for my wakened eyes
As in the hills and waters. Ay, gape at me,
And think me bitten by some evil tooth;
But as a quiet stream at the cliff's edge
Breaks its smooth habit into a loud white force,
So this delight the earth pours over me
Leaps out of women with such excellence,
It seems as I must brace my sinews to it,—
The comely fashion of their limbs, their eyes,
Their gait, and the way they use their arms. And now
My eyes have a message to my heart from them
Such as thou only through a blind skin hast.
Therefore I came back here;—I scarce know why,
But now that women are to me not only
The sacred friends of hidden Awe, not only
Mistresses of the world's unseen foison,
Ay, and not only ease for throbbing groins,
But things mine eyes enjoy as mine ears take songs,
Vision that beats a timbrel in my blood,
Dreams for my sleeping sight, that move aired round
With wonder, as trembling covers a hearth,—
It seems I must be fighting for them, must
Run through some danger to them now before
Delighting in them. I am here to fight
Wolves for the joy of the world, marvellous women!

GAST. Star-madden'd! What is this in earth and women
That pricks thee into wrath against the wolves?
Do I not fight for women too? But I
For what is certain in them, not for madness.

BRYS. I make my fierceness of a mind to set
My spirit high up in the winds of joy,
Before I tumble down into the darkness.
Not thus thy women send thee to thy fighting:
All fear thy battle-courage is, fear-bred

Thine anger. Thou heavily drudgest women,
But yet thou art afraid of them.

GAST. Ay, truly;
For look how from their wondrous bodies comes
Increase: who knoweth where such power ends?
They are in league with the great Motherhood
Who brings the seasons forth in the open world;
And if to them She hands, unseen by us,
Their marvellous bringing forth of children, what
Spirit of Her great dreadful mountain-spell,
Wherein the rocks have purpose against us,
Sealed up in watchful quiet stone, may not
Pass on to their dark minds, that seem so mild,
Yet are so strange; or what charm'd word from out
Her forests whispering endless dangerous things,
Wherefrom our hunters often have run crazed
To hear the trees devising for their souls;
What secret share of Her earth's monstrous power
May She not also grant to women's lives?
Yea, wise is our fear of women; but we fight
For more than fear; we give them liking too.
Who but the women can deliver us
From this continual siege of the wolves' hunger?
High above comfort, on the shrugging backs
Of downland, where the winds parch our skins, and frost
Kneads through our flesh until his fingers clamp
The aching bones, our scanty families
Hold out against the ravin of the wolves,
Fended by earthwork, fighting them with flint.
But if we keep the favour of our women,
They will breed sons to us so many and strong
We shall have numbers that will make us dare
Invade the weather-shelter'd woods, and build
Villages where now only wolves are denn'd;
Yea, to the beasts shall the man-folk become
Malice that haunts their ways, even as now
Our leaguer'd tribes must lurk and crouch afraid

Of wolfish malice always baying near.
And fires, stackt hugely high with timber, shall
With nightlong blaze make friendly the dark and cold,
Cheer our bodies, and roast great feasts of flesh,—
Ah, to burn trunks of trees, not bracken and ling!
This is what women are to me,—a fear
Lest the earth-hidden Awe, who unseen gives
The childing to their flesh, should make their minds
As darkly able as their wombs, with power
To think sorceries over us; and hope
That with their breeding they will dispossess
The beasts of the good lowland, until man,
No longer fled to the hills, inhabit all
The comfort of the earth.

BRYS. These are mine too,
But as great rivers own the brook's young speed.
For in my soul, the women do not dwell
A torch going through darkness, with a troop
Of shadows gesturing after; but as the sun
Upon his height of golden blaze at noon,
With all the size of the blue air about him.
Fear that in women the unseen is seen
And the unknown power sits beside us known,—
This fear is good, but better is than this
Their beauty, and the wells of joy in women.
I speak dumb words to thee; but know, thou Gast,
My soul is looking at the time to come,
And seeing it not as a cavern lit
With smoky burning brandons of thy fear,
But as a day shining with my new joy.
Thou canst not fight with me for the coming heart
Of man,—fear cannot fight with joy. And I
Am setting such a war of joy against thee,
It shall be as man's heart became a god
Murdering thy mind of weakling darkness.
All the hot happiness of being wroth
And seeing a stroke leave behind it wound,

The pleasures of wily hunting, and a feast
After long famine, and the dancing stored
Within the must of berries,—these, and all
Gladdenings that make thrill the being of man
Shall pour, mixt with an unknown rage of glee,
Into the meaning men shall find in women.
And if we have at all a fear of them,
It shall not be the old ignorant dismay,
But of their very potency to delight,
The way their looks make Will an enemy
Hating itself, shall men become afraid.
Women shall cause men know for why they have
Being in the earth;—not to be quailing slack
As if the whole world were a threat, but tuned
Ready for joy as harp-strings for the player.
And great desire of beauty and to be glad
Shall prompt our courages. Ha, what are those
Breaking from out the thickets?

GAST. Wolves! They come!
Brothers, the fiends are on us: have good hearts!
Ho for the women and their sacred wombs!

BRYS. Ho for the women, their beauty and my pleasure!

VASHTI

I

Ahasuerus and Vashti

VASHTI. My lord requires me here.
AHASUERUS. Does Heaven see this?
Dare I have this one humble unto me?
Was it not enough, Stars, to have given me
This marriage? but you must persuade your God
To have me as well the greatest king beneath you!
Look you now if men grow not insolent
Because of me, a man so throned, so wived.
Yea, and in me insolent groweth my love;
For if the wheels of the careering world
Brake, felley and spoke, that, pitching on the road,
It spilt the driving godhead from his seat,
And the unreined team of hours riskily dragg'd
Their crippled duty,—if in that lurching world
Like jarrèd glass my power shattered about me,
And I were a head unking'd, 'twere but a game,
So I were left possessing thee, and that
Escape from Heaven, the beauty that goes with thee.
Here is an insolence! Hast thou not wonder'd,
Vashti, what gave thee into such a love,
That in the brain of me, the chosen king,
It is so loud, so insolent, thy love?
O this shrill sweet heart-mastering love!
VASHTI. Alas,
Do I deserve that love?—But yes, I wonder;
For what am I that the king loveth me?
Lo, I am woman, thou art man, the lord;
Out of mere bounty are we loved of you,
And not for our deserving. We are to sit
In a high calm, and not go down and help

Among the toil, and choosing, chosen, find
Companionship therein. For thou, for man
Has such a treasure in his heart of love,
It must be squandered out in charity,
Not used as a gentle money to repay
Worth (as a woman spends her love). A trick
Of posture in a girl, and see the alms
Of generous love man will enrich her with!
Might there not be sometimes too much of alms
About his love? But we will blink at that.
Yet sometimes we are like ashamed, to be
Taking so much love from you, all for naught.
Now therefore tell me, Man, my king, my master:
Lovest thou me, or dost thou rather love
The pleasure thou hast in me? This is not nice,
Believe me. They're more sundered, these two loves,
Than if all the braving seas marcht between them.

AHASUERUS. What, shrinking from thine own delightsomeness?
Hear then. Nature, so ordered from the God,
Has given strength to man and work to do,
But to woman gave that she should be delight
For man, else like an overdriven ox
Heart-broke. The world was made for man, but made
Wisely a steep difficulty to be climbed,
That he, so labouring the stubborn slant,
May step from off the world with a well-used courage,
All slouch disgrace fought out of him, a man
Well worthy of a Heaven. And this great part
Has woman in the work; that man, fordone
And wearied, may find lodging out of the noise
Upon her breast, and looking in her eyes
May wash in pools of kindness, fresh as Heaven,
The soil of sweat and trouble from his limbs;
And turning aside into this pleasant inn
Called woman, there is entertainment kept
For man, such that for cheating craftily
The stabled palter'd heart that it can pass

Through the world's grillage and be large as fate,
The sweet anxiety of reeded pipes
Is a mere thing to it. Like Heaven street
When the steel of God's army surges through it,
Bright anger burning on an errand of swords,
So is the sense of man when woman-joy
Pours through his flesh a throng of deity,
White clamorous flame; yea, desire of woman
Maketh the mind of more room for amazement
Than that blue loft hath for the light, more charged
With spiritual joy that goes in stress
As far as tears, with this more throbbingly charged,
Than the starr'd night wept full of silver fires,—
Dangerously endured, labours of joy!
Is it not virtuous, not powerful, this?
Wouldst thou have more? Man knows he can possess
Than woman's beauty nought more treasurable.
And high above our loud activities
We keep, pure as the dawn, the house of love,
Woman, wherein we entering leave outside
Our rank sweat-drenchèd weeds of toil, and there
Enjoy ourselves, out of the world, awhile.

VASHTI [*aside*]. O yes, I know. Filthiness! Filthiness!

AHASUERUS. Now here have I been toiling under press
Of glory. Should I not stumble in my gait,
Were there no Vashti, and with her a welcome
I do not need to buy, since all she wants
Is that I love her? Going in unto her
I may unstrap my burdenous pack of kingship,
Shift me of reign, and escape my splendour.
Yea, and strange largeness in this power of love
For men too much limited! Now I am sick
Of knowing my greatness, now I want to be
Placed where my soul can feel vast room about me,
To be contained. Outside, among the men,
I am the room of the world; I and my rule
Contain the world; and I am sick thereof.

Vashti can remedy this; for here thy beauty
More spacious is for my senses to be in,
Than his own golden kingdom for the sun.

VASHTI. Thine eyes are glad with me? I please the King?

AHASUERUS. Eyes? But there is no nerve thou takest not,
No way of my life thronging not with thee;
And my blood sounds at the story of thy beauty.
What thing shall be held up to woman's beauty?
Where are the bounds of it? Yea, what is all
The world, but an awning scaffolded amid
The waste perilous Eternity, to lodge
This Heaven-wander'd princess, woman's beauty?
The East and West kneel down to thee, the North
And South, and all for thee their shoulders bear
The load of fourfold place. As yellow morn
Runs on the slippery waves of the spread sea,
Thy feet are on the griefs and joys of men
That sheen to be thy causey. Out of tears,
Indeed, and blitheness, murder and lust and love,
Whatever has been passionate in clay,
Thy flesh was tempered. Behold in thy body
The yearnings of all men measured and told,
Insatiate endless agonies of desire
Given thy flesh, the meaning of thy shape!
What beauty is there, but thou makest it?
How is earth good to look on, woods and fields
The seasons' garden, and the courageous hills,
All this green raft of earth moored in the seas?
The manner of the sun to ride the air,
The stars God has imagined for the night?
What's this behind them, that we cannot near,
Secret still on the point of being blabbed,
The ghost in the world that flies from being named?
Where do they get their beauty from, all these?
They do but glaze a lantern lit for man,
And woman's beauty is the flame therein
Feeding on sacred oil, man's desire,

A golden flame possessing all the earth.
Or as a queen upon an embassage
From out some mountain-guarded far renown,
Brings caravans stockt from her slavish mines,
Her looms and forges, with a precious friendship;
So comest thou from the chambers of the stars
On thy famed visit unto man the king;
So bringing from the mints and shops of Heaven,
Where thou didst own labours of all the fates,
A shining traffic, all that man calls beauty:
There is no holding out for the heart of man
Against thee and such custom. O hard to be borne,
Often hard to be borne is woman's beauty!—
And well I guess it does but cover up
Enmity, hanging falseness between our souls,
And buy at a dishonest price the mouth
True nature hath for thee, to speak thee fair.
Were not man's thought so gilded with thy beauty,
Woman, and caught in the desire of thee,
O, there'ld be hatred in his use of thee.
You should be thankful for your pleasantness!

VASHTI. Yes, I am thankful. For I hope, my lord,
We women know our style. Ay, we are fooled
Sometimes with heady tampering thoughts, that come
To bother our submission, I confess.
We to ourselves have said, that when God took
The fierce beginning of the unwrought world
From out his fiery passion, and, breathing cool,
Tamed the wild molten being, with his hands
Fashion'd and workt the hot clay into world,
Then with green mercy quieted the land
And claspt it with the summer of blue seas,
With brooches of white spray along the shores,—
It was to be an equal dwelling-place
For humans that he did it, into sex
Unknowably dividing human kind.
But wickedly we say this. God made man

For his delight and praise, and then made woman
For man's delight and praise, submiss to man.
Else wherefore sex? And it is better thus,
To be man's pleasure. What noble work is ours,
To have our bodies proper for your love,
The means of your delight! Ay, and minds too,
Sometimes; we think, we women think we know
What shape of mind pleases our masters best,
And that we build up in us. A tender shyness,
A coy reluctancy,—we use these well.
Man is our master; it is best for us
Persuading him line our captivity
With wool-soft love, lest it be bitter iron.

AHASUERUS. This is the marvel's head, that thou, so fair,
And loved by me, should keep so good a mind.
——They shall not see thee, when I display at large
The riches and the honour; I've enough
Possession, without thee, to stupefy
The assembly of my men, my herd of kings.
I mean there shall not be a hint of doubt
About whose world this is. So I have bid,
From all the utter regions of my land,
The kings whom I allow to rule, who breathe
My air, to feast with me and for a while
Flatter their trivial lives with a brief relish
Of being king of the world's kings in Shushan.
Yea, and I will dismay their wits with splendour;
No noise shall be against me in the world.
I am more open, kinder than Lord God,
Who never shows how much he has of thunder;
Wherefore against him men presume, and go
Often out of his ways extravagant.
But all the fear I keep obedient by me
Now to the gather'd world I openly shew.
So God is spoken against, I am never,
And I have a better terror in the world;
And chiefly for the happiness built round me

Divinely firm. O all the kings, my men,
Shall fear this terrible happiness of mine!
But thee I will not shew; I'll have some wealth
Not public. I'll have no adulteries,
No eyes but mine enjoying thee. To me
The sight of thee, all as the touch of thee,
Belongeth, only my pleasure thou art:
None but my senses shall come unto thee,
And I will keep my pleasure pure as Heaven.
Happy art thou, Vashti, to have wedded
One who so dearly rates possession of thee.
Better it is to spend my heart on thee
Than on any of the women that I have.

II

The Feast of Kings: Midnight

AHASUERUS. You kings, you thrones that burn about the world,
Whom yet I king, lifted higher above you
Than you are lifted up above your folks:
This is my day. I have agreed with Heaven,
My fellow in the fear of the world, to have
This day unshar'd; and it is all mine,
All that the Gods from baseless fires and steams
Have harden'd into the place and kind of the world:
The great high quiet journey of the stars,
And all the golden hours which the sun
Utters aloft in heaven;—the whole is mine
To fill with ceremonies of my throne.
This one day, I am where Heaven and I
Commonly stand together; you shall not have
Shelter from me in a worshipt God to-day,
Kings; look yonder at many-power'd night,
Telling her beauty to the sea and taking
The prone adoring waters into her blue
Desire, setting them as herself on flame
With perils of joy, lending them her achieved

Raptures, her white experiences of stars.
So shall your souls lie under me these hours;
As they were waters shall they be beneath
My burning, set alight with me, and none
Escape from utterly understanding me
And why I am so kindled in my soul.
Who has been like to me? My name travels
A hundred seven and twenty languages,
My name a ship upon them, trading fear.
My unseen power weighs upon the heads
Of nations, like the blown abasement given
By sedges when they are wretched to the wind.
Ay, and the farthest goings of the air
Can reach no land my taxes do not labour.
The fear of me is the conscience of the world.
Ahasuerus is a region large
As there is light upon the earth; when dawn
With golden duties celebrates the sun,
It does but serve to fetch the lives I own
Out of shadow flinching into the light,—
Out of sleep's mercy the sore lives that know
Only a penal sun, that are so chapt
In winds of my sent spirit: I care not, I.
For as my flesh out of my father's joy
Came, fraught from him with hunger for like joy,—
As, when roused ages of desire with me
Play with my blood as storms play with the sea,
And all my senses tug one way like sails,
My flesh obeys, and into that perilous dream,
Woman, exults;—so, but much more, my soul,
That had its faculties from far beyond
The tingling loam of flesh, obeys a need:
Conquest, and nations to enjoy with war.
For 'tis a need that rode down out of God
Upon my journeying soul into this world's
Affairs, like smouldering fire besiegers throw
Among a city's roofs, which cannot choose

But take blaze from the whole town's timber; so
My soul's desire for flame hath charred the world.
Till now, as the night full of perfect fires,
I, full of conquests, am large over you.
And you must be like waters underneath me,
Full of my burning; there 's no more for me
Now, but to dwell alone in my still soul's
Hoarding of ecstasies, a great place of lusts
Achieved and shining fixt; for every man
Is mine, and every soil is mine, from here
Round to the furthest cliffs that steadfast are
To keep the hoofs of the sea from murdering
The tilled leagues of the land. And by the coasts
I am not kept. Far into the room of waters,
Into the blue middle of ocean's summer,
The white gait of my sea-going war invades.
I have a man here, one who makes with words,
And he shall be my messenger to your hearts.
Not to make much of me; but he 's the speech
Of Spirit,—I the dangerous exultation,
The Spirit's sacred joy in wrath against
The heaps of its own spent kinds, melting anew
To found in another image of itself.
He is the man to shew you, withinside
The flashing and exclaim of my great moving
About the places of the world; within
The heat of my pleasure that has molten down,
Like ingots in a furnace, all your nations
Into my likeness treading on the earth;
Within the smokes that make your eyes pour grief,
This gleam of infinite purpose quietly nested,—
That I am given the world, and that my pleasure
Is plain the latest word spoken of God.
So while our senses go among these wines,
Wander in green deliciousness and crimson,
And fragrance searches the else-unsearchable brain,
Poet, tell out the glory of the king.

THE POET. The glory of the king of all the kings.—
You with the golden power on your brows,
You kings, I think you know not what you are.
First you shall learn yourselves: for neither light
Understandeth itself, nor darkness light.
You see your glory; but you cannot see
That which your glory conquers; and the peoples
Know nought but that the glooming of their night
Maketh a shining scope for crowns, as he,
Even as he, your king, Ahasuerus,
Maketh your splendour a darkness for his light.
But I, neither belonging to the kings
Nor to the people, only I may know
The golden fortune of light anointing kings.
Come with me now, and take my vision awhile.
The people of this world are misery.
What doth Man here? How thinketh God on him?
Surely he was sent here as if thereby
God might forget him. Like infamous desire
A wise heart puts aside, which yet remains
A secret hated memory, man was
In God, and is vainly discarded here.
I see him coming here; I see man's life
Falling into this base and desert ground,
This world that seems an evil riddance thrown
Down by the winds of God's swift purposes;
Some shame of grossness, that would cling upon
The errand of their holy speed, and here
Heapt up and strewn into the place wherein
The mind and being of man wander darkly.
Behold him coming here!—Against my sight,
Warning aback the gleam of sacred heaven,
Is vast forbiddance raised; creatures like hills,
Or darkness surging at the coasts of light,
Stand, a great barricade behind our lives,
Rankt as Eternity had put on stature.
The sharp sides of the peaks are finger'd white

With flame, lit by the fires of God beyond;
The rest is night; the whole people of dark hills
A front of high impenetrable doom.
But lo!
Black in the blackness, is a yawn in the doom,
And out of it flows the kind of man. Behold,
It is a river, through the permission sent
As through a snarling breakage in a cliff;
Turned like a hated thing away from God;
Spat out, the water of man's life, to spill
Down bleak gullies, and thrid the gangways dark
Through the reluctant hills, pouring as if
It knew God were ashamed of it. And thence,
Rejected down the abhorring steeps, man's life
Is wasted in this country, set to run
A blind, ignorant, unremembered course,
Treading with hopeless feet of griev'd waters
Unending unblest spaces, the shameful road
Of dirt thickening into slime its flow,
An insane weather driving. For at the issue,
Hovering mightily fledge to beat it on,
A climate of demon's wings o'erarches man,
The hatred God has sent pursuing him.
Fierce hawking spirits wrong him, hungry Cold,
Crazes of Fear and sickening Want, and huge
Injurious Darkness, lord of the bad wings
That pester all the places beyond God,—
These at the door, with lust to embody themselves,
Wait for the naked journey of man's life
To seize it into ache, ravenously.
They never leave, down all its patient way,
To meddle with its waters, till they be sour
As venom, salt as weeping, foully ailing
With foreign evil,—all the sorts of desires
Whoring the shuddering life unto their lust.
Behold man's river now; it has travelled far
From that divine loathing, and it is made

One with the two main fiends, the Dark and Cold,
The faithful lovers of mankind. Behold,
Broad it is now become, a plenteous water,
A roomy tide. And lo, what oars are these?
To sweet sung measure rows what happy fleet,
With at the lifted prows banners of flame,
Bravely scaring the darkness to betray
The black embarasst flood sheared by the stems?
Behold, at last God for man's misery
Hath found excuse! Behold his wretchedness
Gilded at last with beauty pleasant to God!
No longer a useless grief is man's life now;
For floating on it, for enjoying it,
A state of barges goes, the state of kings.
They bring a day with them of many lamps,
And as they move, on the black slabbèd waters
Red wounds, and green, and golden, do they shoot
About them, beautiful cruelty of light;
And they throw music over the sounding river.
I too am walking on the sea of man;
I watch your singing and your lamps row past;
And under me I hear the river speaking,
The great blind water moaning to itself
For sorrow it was made. But in your blithe ships
Silverly chained with luxury of tune
Your senses lie, in a delicious jail
Of harmony, hours of string'd enchantment.
Or if you wake your ears for the river's voice,
You hear the chime of fawning lipping water,
Trodden to chattering falsehood by the keels
Of kings' happiness. And what is it to you,
When strangely shudders the fabric of your navy
To feel the thrilling tide beneath it grieving;
Or when its timber drinks the river's mood,
The mighty mood of man's Despair, which runs
Like subtle electric blood through all the hulls,
And tips each masthead with a glimmering candle

Blue-pale and flickering like a ghost? For you
Are too much lit to mark a corposant.
Nor yours the stale smell of the unhealthful stream,
Clotted with mud and sullen with its weeds,
Who carry your own air with you, blest sweet
And drencht with many scattered fragrances.
You, sailing in golden ignorance, know not
The anxious flow of life under your way:
Do you not miss half the wonder of you?—
That so your happiness in the thought of God
Stands, that he open'd man's expense of grief
To give your oars unscrupulous room, to be
The buoyancy of your delighted barges,
Sliding with fortunate lanterns and with tunes
And odorous holiday, O kings, O you
The pleasure of God, richly, joyously launcht
On this kind sea, the tame sorrow of Man?
You need poets to reckon your marvellousness——

AHASUERUS. Where is he driving? I set thee not to this;
It was to tell what I, not what they, be.

POET. How can they know what thou art, if not first
I tell them what they are themselves, my king?

AHASUERUS. Thou hast a night, man, not a week to tell them.
You men of words, dealers in breath, conceit
Too bravely of yourselves;—O I know why
You love to make man's life a villainous thing,
And pose his happiness with heavy words.
You mean to puff your craft into a likeness
Of what hath been in the great days of the Gods.
When Tiamat, the old foul worm from hell,
Lay coiled and nested in the unmade world,
All the loose stuff dragg'd with her rummaging tail
And packt about her belly in a form,
Where she could hutch herself and bark at Heaven,—
The god's bright soldier, Bel, fashioned a wind;
And when her jaws began her whining rage
Against him, into her guts he shot the wind

And rent the membranes of her life. So you
Wordmongers would be Bel to the life of man.
You like not that his will should heap the world
About him in a fumbled den of toil;
And set the strength of his spirit, not to joy,
But to laborious money; so you stand forth
And think with spoken wind to make such stir
And rumble in the inwards of man's life,
That he in a noble colic will leap up
Out of his cave of work and breathe sweet air.
You will not do it: man prefers his den.
Now leave mankind alone and sing of me.

POET. So; I will tell thy glory now aright.
I will not make it thy chief wonder, King,
That thou hast tied the world upon a rack;
Or that thy armies be so huge, the earth
Sways like a bridge of planks beneath their march,
And leagues about their way out of the ground
Like thunder comes the rumour of thy vengeance.
These be but shows of kingship; but one thing
Exclaims, inevitably as a word
Announced by God, thee first of the world's souls,—
That thou mayst have in thy arms Vashti the Queen.—
Princes, what looks are these?
Why are your minds astonisht so unwisely?
What, think you war the thing, or pompous fame?
See if I speak not truth of love and woman.
You will have heard how lightning 's struck a man,
Shepherd or wayfarer, and when they found
The branded corpse, the rayment was torn off,
Blown into tatters and strewn wide by that
Withering death, and he birth-naked stretcht:
Bethink you, is not that now very like
How woman smites your souls? Whatever dress
Of thought you take to royalize your nature,—
Gorgeous shawls of kingship, a world's fear,
Or ample weavings of imagination,

Or the spun light of wisdom,—like a gust
Of flame, that weather of impersonal thought
You strut beneath, that hanging storm of Love,
Strikes down a terrible swift dazzling finger,
Sight of some woman, on your clothèd hearts,
And plucks the winding folly off, and leaves
Bare nature there. And hear another likeness.
Look, if the priests have made an altar-fire,
They can have any flame they list, as gums
Sprinkle the fuel, or salts, or curious earths,—
Tawny or purple, green, scarlet, or blue,
Or moted with an upward rain of sparks;
But first there must be air, or else no fire:
Man's being is a fire lit unto God,
And many thoughts colour the sacred flame;
But the air for him, the draught wherein he glows,
The breathing spirit that has turned mere life
Into the hot vehement being of man
Lambent upon the altar of the world,
Is woman and desire of her, nought else.
Behold, we know not what we do at all
When we love women: is it we who love,
Or Destiny rather visiting our souls
In passion?—How shall I name thee what thou art,
Woman, thou dream of man's desire that God
Caught out of man's first sleep and fashioned real?
Deliverance art thou from his own strait thought,
Wind come from beyond the stars
To blow away like mist all the disgrace
Of reasonable bars,
The forgery of time and place,
Whereinto soul was narrowly brought
When it was gridded close behind
The working of man's mind.
But Woman comes to bless
With an immoderateness,
With a divine excess,

Lust of life and yearn of flesh,
Till there seems naught hindering our souls:
Else we should crawl along the years
Labour'd with measurable joys
No greater than our life,
Things carefully devised against tears;
And as snails harden their sweat
To brittle safety, a carried shell,
So we might build out of our woe of toil
Serious delight.
But to see and hear and touch Woman
Breaks our shell of this accursed world,
And turns our measured days to measureless gleam.
Up in a sudden burning flares
The dark tent of nature pitched about our souls;
And light, like a stound of golden din,
A shadowless light like weather of infinite plains,
Light not narrowed into place,
Amazes the naked nerves of the soul;
And like the pouring of immortal airs
Out of a flowery season,
Over us blows the inordinate desire.—
  Ah, who from Hell did the wisdom bring
That would make life a formal thing?
Who has invented all the manner and wont,
The customary ways,
That harness into evil scales
Of malady our living?
But how they shrivel and craze
If love but glance on them!
And as a bowl of glass to shattering
Shivers at a sounding string,
The brittle glittering self of man
At beauty of Woman throbs apieces,
And seems into Eternity spilled
The being it contained.
Let it touch Woman and flesh becomes

Finer and more thrilled
Than air contrived in tune,
Lighter round the soul
Than flame is round burning.
She is God's bribery to man
That he the world endure,
His wage for carrying the weight of being.
Nay, she is rather the eternal lure
Out of form and things that end,
Out of all the starry snares,
Out of the trap of years,
Into measureless desire;
Lest man be satisfied with mind.—
Be never stung into self-hate
At crouching always in the crate
Of prudent knowledge round him wrought,
And so grow small as his own thought.
  Kings, think of the woman's body you love best:
How the beloved lines twin and merge,
Go into rhyme and differ, swerve and kiss,
Relent to hollows or like yearning pout,—
Curves that come to wondrous doubt
Or smooth into simplicities;
Like a skill of married tunes
Curdled out of the air;
How it is all sung delivering magic
To your pent hamper'd souls!
I tell you, kings, yours are but stammer'd songs
To that enchantment fashion'd for him,
That ceremony of life's powers,
The loveliness of Vashti;
That unbelievable worship made
For King Ahasuerus.
He to whom the loveliest she is given,
Least is bound to ended things,
Belongeth most on earth to Heaven;
Hath the whitest wind of flame

To burn his soul clean of the world,
Clean of mortal imaginings,
And back to the Beauty whence he came.
Now you hear the glory of the king of kings,
That he knows Vashti, that he lives
In this pleasure always.
Ah, could you see her! But perhaps she is
Too fearful in her beauty for most men.
I think she would dismay you, and unhitch
The sinews from their purchase on your bones,
And have you spelled as a wizard spells his ghosts.
Yet 'twould be mercy so to harm your sense.
The truth does not more wonderfully walk,
Whose gestures are the stars, than in her ways
This queen's body sways.
And there is such language in her hair
As the sun's self doth talk.
King, let them see her! lest they return unwise
Of thy true kingship, and among themselves
Imagine that they are even as thou,
Save in the height of throne. Let them perceive
That, having Vashti, there is none like thee:
Others are men; but thou art he whose spirit
Is station'd in the beauty of the queen,
Whose flesh knows such amazement as before
Never beneath the lintels of man's sense
Came, an especial messenger from Heaven.

AHASUERUS. Bring her! let the Queen come crowned before us!
Slaves, fetch here all your light to shine upon
My Vashti's beauty; let there be clear floor;
Make the air worthy her with camphire lit
And frankincense; and fill the hall with flames.
Then gaze, kings, and stare, hunger with your eyes
Upon her face; but within brakes of fear
Fasten your wills, and move not from your seats.
Exult, you thron'd nations, that to your sight
She shall be lent, the pleasure of the king,

She whom to visit so inflames my soul,
That I can judge how God burns to enjoy
The beauty of the Wisdom that he made
And separated from himself to be
Wife to the divine act, mother of heavens.—
Let Vashti come and stand before the kings!

III

Vashti and the King's Women at their Feast

1ST WOMAN. Queen, is it well to be so sorrowful?
2ND WOMAN. And when the King our lord spendeth on us
This festival out of his rich heart, to shoot
Thy looks upon us as thou wouldst rebuke us?
VASHTI. Your pardon: do I trouble your greed?
1ST WOMAN. Our greed?
Rather our gratitude——
2ND WOMAN. That we have share
In these devices of the King's own cooks,
These costly breads,——
1ST WOMAN. And these delicious meats,
These sauces mixt of spicy treacle and balm.
3RD WOMAN. And wines, purple and blue and like gold fire,
Made of the colours of the morning sea
And fragrance wild as woman's need of love.
VASHTI. Enjoy them then: who lets you?
3RD WOMAN. Thou dost, Queen.
Thou sittest with hands folded in thy robe,
And in the midst of delicacies wilt fast.
1ST WOMAN. We see thine eyes upon them as they were
Wickedness.
2ND WOMAN. 'Tis rare bounty that we women
Halve with the King his festival.
3RD WOMAN. And thou,
It seems, scarce findest it thankworthy.
VASHTI. Again,
Your pardon: but ye need not gaze on me.—

And yet, why am I sorrowful? In truth,
Is it a sorrow that so leans upon me?
I know not. But my soul knoweth right well
That I am watcht.

3RD WOMAN. Then in thy conscience, Queen,
Thou feelest the King requiring thanks of thee.

VASHTI. Be careful of thy tongue,—and of the wine.—
Who watches me? Eyes are fixt on my soul,
Eyes of desire. I think some great event
Hath pusht its spirit forward of its time,
To stand here quietly waiting, into my mind
Inflicting its strange want of me, and ready
To fetch my heart, and ready to take my hand
And lead me away shrinking: is it Death?
It is some marvellous thing: for I know surely
Behind it crowd out of their discipline
The coming hours to watch me seized, and stare
With questioning brows on me, and lift lean hands
From under gowns of shadow to point me out
One to another, saying: 'This is she:
How will she bear it, think ye?'—Is it not cold?
Was there not wind just then?—The flames are steady.

1ST WOMAN. No wind at all: the air's like one closed room.

2ND WOMAN. There is no talk like this at the King's feast,
I warrant. Were we not best be merry,
And thank the King so for these wines and sweets?

VASHTI. Yes, let us not forget our thankfulness;
For is not, sisters, everything we have
Mere gift?

2ND WOMAN. My beauty pays for what I get.

VASHTI. I would, 'twere not so.

2ND WOMAN. Queen, I doubt thee not.

VASHTI. Pert little fool, where lies thy beauty, then?
Thou hast it not: its place is not thy flesh,
But the delighting loins of men, there only.
Thy beauty! And thou knowest not that man
Hath forged in his furnace of desire our beauty

Into that chain of law which binds our lives—
Man, please thyself, and woman, please thou man.
But thou wilt have thy beauty pence, thou sayest?
And what 's thy purchase? Listen, I will tell thee:
Just that thou art not whipt and drudged: the rest,
All that thou hast beyond, is gift.

2ND WOMAN. Why not?

VASHTI. Truly, for thee, why not?

2ND WOMAN. Wouldst thou, 'twere yours?

1ST WOMAN. Thou shudderest again; what ails thee, Queen?

VASHTI. I would have lived in beauty once.

2ND WOMAN. In whose?

VASHTI. I know the King finds relish in thy looks,
Wench, and I have no care to grudge thy pride;
But when thy face is named throughout the world
For wonder, I will bear thy impudence.

1ST WOMAN. But tell us, Queen, thy thought; for we have made
An end almost of eating; and it seems
It will be somewhat strange, pleasing our mood

VASHTI. Strange you will find it doubtless; but scarce pleasing,
Unless 'tis pleasing to have news of danger.
Listen! your lives are propt like a rotten house.
Your souls, that should have noble lodging here,
Have crept like peasants into huts that have
No force within their walls, but must be shored
With borrowed firmness. Yea, man's stubborn lust
To feed his heart upon your beauty, is all
The strength your lives have, all that holdeth you
Safe in the world,—propt like a rotten house.

1ST WOMAN. Shall woman then not love to have man's love?

3RD WOMAN. To feed his heart on us, thou sayest? O yea!
And how can a woman know such might of living
As when upon her breast she feels the man,
The man of her desire, like sacrament
Feeding his heart, yea and his soul, on her?

VASHTI. Are we for nought but so to nourish him?

3RD WOMAN. Thou art too proud, O Queen, too proud and lonely,
And goest apart to have thy thought too much.
'Tis known, too much thought dazes oft a mind,
Till it can learn nought of the signèd evil
God hath put in the faces of evil notions,
That spiritual sight may ken them coming
Sly and demure, and safely shut the brain
Ere they be in and swell themselves to lordship.
Hence is it that an evil thought in thee
Hath dared so far, and played its wickedness
Strangely within thee, braving even into speech.
1ST WOMAN. Strangely indeed thy brain 's inhabited.
What, is there aught prosperity for woman
But to be shining in the thought of man?
VASHTI. I wisht to prosper in the life I had,
That the Gods might approve the flourishing
Their heavenly graft of soul took from my flesh.
Therefore I wisht to love. And I did love.—
There came Ahasuerus conquering
Into my father's land. My fancying hate
Had made a man-beast of him, a thing, like man,
Tall in his walk, but in the mood of his eyes
A beast, and in the noise of his mouth a beast.
He came, and lookt at me; and, in a while,
I saw that he was speaking to me there.
And all the maiden went in me before him,
Swifter than in a moon which looks against
The morning, all the silver courage fails.—
How cam'st thou to the King?
1ST WOMAN. Sold to him, I.
2ND WOMAN. Bought by him, I: for he had heard of me.
VASHTI. I also, sold or bought; nay, rather paid:
Paid like cash to him, that as servant king
My father might have life, and a throne in life.
It mattered nothing then. [*The* QUEEN *pauses.*
Often in early summer, as I walkt
A girl singing her happiness, beside

The high green corn, holding all earth my own,
I saw, as my feet and my voice past by,
How in its hiding some croucht little beast
Startled, and filled a space of the gentle corn
With plunging quivering fear. And always then
My heart answer'd the fear that shook the corn,
With a sudden doubt in its beating; for I knew
Within my life such rousing of dismay
I myself should watch, with seizing wonder.
It is so: in the midst of my new love,
That promist such a plenty in my soul,
At last some sleeping terror leapt awake,
And made the young growth shiver and wry about
Inwardly tormented. Yea, and my heart
It was, my heart in its hiding of green love,
That took so wildly the approaching sound
Of something strangely fearful walking near.

3RD WOMAN. A queer tale, this.

1ST WOMAN. A spectre visited you?

VASHTI. Indeed, a spectre.

1ST WOMAN. That have I never seen.
Was it the kind with nose and mouth grown sharp
To an eagle's bill, and claws upon its fingers,
The curve of them pasted with a bloody glue?

VASHTI. The spectre was—my beauty.

3RD WOMAN. It is as I said.
O Queen, send for a wise man in the morning;
And let him leech thy spirit.

4TH WOMAN. I've heard, the best
Riddance for evil notions in the mind,
Is for a toad to sit upon the tongue;
While, breathed against the scalp, some power of spells
Loosens the clasp the notion hath digg'd deep
Into the soul; so that it passeth down,
Shaken and mastered, and creeps into the toad,——

3RD WOMAN. Which gives a foolish kick or start to feel it,——

4TH WOMAN. Then the trapt notion may be easily burnt.

VASHTI. Yea?—I think mine would not burn easily.
With fire, with such indignant fire as pride
Yields, when it must destroy itself to feel
The power of the world touch it with humbling flame,—
With such a fire, whose heat you know not of,
Have I assayed this—notion, didst thou say?
And it stood upright, with its shape unquencht,
And lived within the fire.

3RD WOMAN. Thou hast it wrong.

4TH WOMAN. Thou hast not understood the cure we meant.

2ND WOMAN. Stop brabbling, fools; I would hear the Queen's mind.

1ST WOMAN. I too; I hate a thing I cannot skill;
And thee and all that lives in thee, O Queen,
I would keep friendly to my spirit; yet
I do suspect something amazing in thee.

VASHTI. And if thou seest not how slippery
Is women's place in the world of men, 'tis like
Thou wilt amazedly the vision take,
When I have led thee up my tower of thought.

2ND WOMAN. How are we dangerous? Are we not women,
Man's endless need?

VASHTI. Ay, and therein the danger!
Is it not possible he hate the need?
For not as he were a beast it urges him:
He is aware of it, he knows its force.—
The kind of beasts is in their blood alone,
But man is blood and spirit. And in him,
As in all creature, is the word from God,
'Utter thyself in joy.'

2ND WOMAN. And we his joy.

VASHTI. But such an one that may become, perhaps,
Something not utterance, but strict commanding,
Yea, mastery, like the dancing in the blood
Of one bitten by spiders. And it is Spirit,
Spirit enjoying woman, that hath sent
A beating poison in the blood of man,

The poison which is lust. Spirit was given
To use life as a sense for ecstasy;
Life mixt with Spirit must exult beyond
Sex-madden'd men and sex-serving women,
Into some rapture where sweet fleshly love
Is as the air wherein a music rings.
But blood hath captured Spirit; Spirit hath given
The strength of its desire of joy to make
What ecstasy it may of woman's beauty,
And of this only, doing no more than train
The joys of blood to be more keen and cunning;
As men have trained and tamed wild lives of the forests,
Breeding them to more excellent shape and size
And tireless speed, and to know the words of men.
So the wise masterful Spirit rules the joys
That come all fierce from roaming the dark blood;
They are broken to his desire, they are wily for him,
A pack of lusts wherewith the Spirit hunts
Pleasure; and the chief prey the pleasure hid
In woman.

1ST WOMAN. What joys are these?

VASHTI. What joys?
The joys of rutting beasts, tamed to endure,
Tamed to be always swift to answer Spirit,
Yet fiercer for their taming, wilder hungers;
So that the Spirit, if he hunt them not,
Fears to be torn by them in mutiny.
Now know you woman's beauty! 'Tis these joys,
The heat of the blood's desires, changed and mastered
By the desire of spirit, trained to serve
Spirit with lust, spirit with woman enjoy'd.

2ND WOMAN. Queen, I am beautiful, and cannot boast
Thy subtle thinking; and to one like me,
What matters whence come beauty, so I have it?
Let it be but the witless mating of beasts,
Tamed and curiously knowing itself
And cunning in its own delight: What then?

The nightingale desires his little lass,
And that brings out of his heart a radiant song;
A man desires a woman, and for song
Out of his heart comes beauty, that like flame
Reaches towards her, and covers her limbs with light.
If it so please thee, say that neither loves
Aught but his life's desire, fashioning it
Adorably to marvellous song and beauty.
What then? Enough that the wonder lights on me,
To me is paid the worship of the wonder.

VASHTI. O well I know how strong we are in man;
His senses have our beauty for their god,
And his delight is built about us like
Towering adoration, housing worship.—
The spirit of man may dwell in God: the world,
From the soft delicate floor of grass to those
Rafters of light and hanging cloths of stars,
Is but the honour in God's mind for man,
Wrought into glorious imagination.
But women dwell in man; our temple is
The honour of man's sensual ecstasy,
Our safety the imagined sacredness
Fashion'd about us, fashion'd of his pleasure.
Beauty hath done this for us, and so made
Woman a kind within the kind of man.
Yea, there is more than this: a mighty need
Hath man made of his woman in the world.
Now man walks through his fate in fellowship
Of two companion spirits; ay, and these
With double mastery go on with him.
The one in black disgraceful weeds is Toil;
She sows with never-ending gesture all
The path before his feet, cursing the way
She drags him on with growth of flouting crops,
Urchin thistles, and rank flourishing nettles.
But the other has a wear of woven gleam,
And with soft hand beseeches him his face

Away from the hardships of his hurt stung feet,
That with his eyes he may desire her looks:
And she is Beauty of Woman, man's dear blessing.
And if you would be wise, be well afraid
To think you have more office than to be
A sweet delicious while amid man's hours
Of worldly labour: we are too precious, so.
Yet see you not how this that Spirit hath done
Is also dangerous?—For there are mightier needs!
There 's no content for Spirit in the world
Till he has striven out of bounded fate,
And sent an infinite desire forth
Into the whole eternity of things.
Yea, Spirit ails with loathing secretly
The irremediable force of being;
Unless, with free expatiate desire,
He shape into the endless burning flux
Of starry world blindly adventuring
Some steady righteous destiny for Spirit:
Even as dreaming brain fashions the fume
Of life asleep to marshall'd imagery.
But we are in the way of this: and man,
The more he needs to announce upon the world,
Over him going like a storming air,
That fashioning word which utters the divine
Imagination working in him like anger;
The more he finds his virtue caught and clogged
In the fierce luxury he hath made of woman.
Thence are we sin, thence deliciously
Persuading man refuse his highest ardour.
Too easily kindled was the ecstasy
Of fleshly passion, with a joyous flame
Too readily answering the Spirit's fire!
He burns with us alone, so fragrantly
His noblest vigour swoons delighted. Yea,
Women, I tell you, not far now is man
From hating us, so passionate the joy

Of loving us, so mightily drawing down
Into the service of his pleasure here
All forces of his being. The pleasure soon
Becomes a shame, scarce to be spoken aloud;
And in best minds, either detested doting
Man's joy in woman's beauty will become;
Or a strict binding fire, holding him down
In lust of beauty where no beauty is.

[*The King's Messenger comes in.*

MESSENGER. To Vashti, to the Queen of the world, to her
In whom the striving beauty of the world
Hath made perfection, from the King I come.
And the King bids me say, Rise from thy feast;
For thou must be to-night thyself a feast:
The vision of thy loveliness must now
Feed with astonishment my vassals' hearts.
Therefore thou art to come.

VASHTI. And tell the King
I will not come.

MESSENGER. What was there in my words
Thou dost not understand?—I say, the King
Would show thy beauty to his under-kings,
That with this also they may be amazed
And utterly fear his fortune.

VASHTI. So. Go back,
Tell the King I have hearkened to his message,
And tell him I will not come.

MESSENGER. What sickness shall I say has lighted on thee,
So that thou canst not come?

VASHTI. Thou weariest me.
Say this to the King, Vashti will not come.
Are they not plain, my words? Canst thou not learn them?

MESSENGER. Give me some softer speech. Must I not fear
I shall earn whipping if I take these words?

VASHTI. I pray thee, go. Thou art a trouble here;
Seest thou not how all these feasting women
Pause, and the pleasure is distrest in them?

Thou hast thy message: say, She will not come.—
Back to the King, now!

MESSENGER. I am whipt for this. [*He goes.*

VASHTI. It seems, my sisters, we have changed our moods.
But now, my mind was heavy, you were blithe;
And in a moment, you, behold, are fixt
Gazing like desperate things, while I rejoice.

1ST WOMAN. Rejoice! thou dost rejoice? then madness does.

VASHTI. I know not that: but certainly I know
A mind, that has been feeling for long time
The greatness of some hovering event
Poised over life, will rejoice marvellously
When the event falls, suddenly seizing life:
Like faintness when a thunderstorm comes down,
That turns to exulting when the lightning flares,
Shattering houses, making men afraid.
And this is my event: I am its choice.
Yea, not as a storm, but as an eagle now
It stoops on me; and, though I am its prey,
I am lifted by majestic wings, my soul
Is clothed in swiftness of a mighty soaring.

3RD WOMAN. What glory can her wondrous eyes behold?

4TH WOMAN. Seemeth her flesh to glow! and her throat pants
As one who feels a god within her, come
Out of his heaven to enjoy her.

2ND WOMAN. Ay,
Now it is true, the Queen is beautiful;
She could, so looking, enrage love in one
Whose blood a hundred years had frozen dry.

1ST WOMAN. Ah, but I fear thee, Queen: this dreadful mood
Will break the pleasantness of friendship thou
Hast kept for me, as a ship in a gale is broken.

VASHTI. Ay, very like: and the event will rouse
Such work in the water where your comfort sails,
More than my fortune will to pieces blow;
You too I think will get some perilous tossing
From what proves my destruction.

2ND WOMAN. And, so knowing,
For mere insane delight in violent things,
Wilt thou awake in the fickle mood of men
Again that ancient ignominy which once,
Till beauty freed them, loaded the souls of women?
3RD WOMAN. Truly, long time will work what now thou doest.
VASHTI. I know not rightly what I here begin;
No more than one, who stands in midst of wind
On a tall mountain, knows what breaking down
The earth must have ere the wind's speed is done,
And it hath drawn out of the drenched soil
The clinging vapours, and made bright the air.
2ND WOMAN. But we'll not have thee disobedient.
The King's mind is a summer over us;
Thou with a storm wilt fill him, and the hail
That shatters thee will leave us bruised and weeping.
VASHTI. Be sulky in his arms: the weather soon
Will pleasantly favour thee again.
4TH WOMAN. No, no;
Not because from our heaven of man's mind
Thou wilt bring down on us a rain of scorn,
But because thou art wicked, thou must go
And tell the King the wine was rash in thee.
VASHTI. I must!
3RD WOMAN. Thou must indeed: words such as thine
Never were impudent in men's ears before.
2ND WOMAN. We will not have thee disobedient.
1ST WOMAN. Here comes another: gentle words, my Queen,
Let him take from thee now, and swiftly follow
Contrite, and let the beauty of thy grief
Bend pleading against the King's furious eyes.
[*The Poet comes in, and kneels.*
POET. I will not ask thee what strange anger sent
That blaze of proud contempt in the King's face:
But ere the voice of the King seals up thy life
In an unalterable judgment, I
Am granted now to come as his last message:

And, as I will, to speak. Here then I am
Not as commanding, but on my knees beseeching,
And for myself beseeching.

VASHTI. What hast thou
To do with this? and wherefore wert thou chosen?

POET. I was to praise the splendour of the King;
And I made thee his splendour; and the King,
Knowing my truth, would have thee brought, to break
All the pride of his under-kings, already
Desperate with his riches, and now seeing
What marvellous fortune also hath his love,
How marvellously delighted.

VASHTI. Get thee back:
And tell the King 'tis time his judgment fell.

POET. Not till thou hearest me.

VASHTI. I will not hear thee.
Wouldst thou go on before me, and say, Look,
This is the woman which I told you of,
You kings; does she not, as I said, stir up
Quaking desire through all your muscles? Look,
And thank the King for showing you his lust!—
I will not hear thee.

POET. Dost thou not know, my Queen,
That, when I taught thee songs, thou taughtest me
The divine secret, Beauty? My small tunes
Were games to thee; but now I am he who knows
How man may walk upon Eternity
Wearing the world as a god wears his power,
The world upon him as a burning garment;
For I am he whose spirit knoweth beauty,—
And thou art the knowledge, Queen! Therefore thou must
Come with me to the kings of all the nations;
For the whole earth must know of thee. These kings,
Though it be but a lightning-moment struck
Upon the darkness of their ignorant hearts,
Must know what I know; that there is a beauty,
Only in thee shown forth in bodily sign,

Which can of life make such triumphant glee,
The force of the world seems but man's spirit utter'd.
VASHTI. And what am I to know?—This must, no doubt,
Content me, that we are as wine, and men
By us have senses drunk against his toil
Of knowing himself, for all his boasting mind,
Caught by the quiet purpose of the world,
Burnt up by it at last, like something fallen
In molten iron streaming. But I know
Not drunken may man's soul master his world;
And I now make for woman a new mood,
Wherein she will not bear to know herself
A heady drug for man.—I will not come.
POET. I, who have brought thy insult on the King,
Will scarce escape his judgment. But not this
My pleading. Seest thou not how wonderfully
The mean affairs of living fill with gleam,
Like pools of water lying in the sun,
Because above men's minds renown of thee,
The certain knowledge of beauty, now presides?
It must not be that thou, for a whim of scorn,
Wilt let thyself be made unseen, unheard of.
Beauty is known in thee; but, without thee,
It is a rumour buzzing hardly heard.
And without beauty men are scurrying ants,
Rapid in endless purpose unenjoyed;
Or newts in holes under the banks of ponds,
Feeding and breeding without sound or light.
For the one thing that is the god in man
Is a delight that admirably knows
Itself delighted; and it is but beauty.
And thou art beauty known.
VASHTI. Truly, I say,
I know not how to bear it; that for you
To feel yourselves, though in the depth of the world,
Dizzy, and thence as if elate on high,
We women are devised like drunkenness.

And what are we to make of ourselves here,
When in the joy of us you think the world
No more than your spirits crying out for joy?
Is this your love, to dream a god of man,
And women to keep as wine to make you dream?—
Now, back! or the eunuchs handle thee. [*He goes.*

VASHTI. You will not hear of me after this night,
And thus I say farewell. It may be, far
In time not yet appointed, our life's spirit
Will know its fate, through all the thickets of grief,
As simply and as gladly as one's eyes
Greet the blue weather shining behind trees.
Yea, and I think there will be more than this:
Is not the world a terrible thing, a vision
Of fierce divinity that cares not for us?
Do we not seem immortal good desire,
Mortally wronged by capture in swift being
Made of a world that holds us firm for ever?
And yet is it not beautiful, the world?
How read you that? How is our wrong delightful?
Thus it is: Spirit finding the world fair,
Is spirit in dim perception of its own
Radiant desire piercing the worldly shadow.
But what is dim will become glorious clear:
All in a splendour will the Spirit at last
Stand in the world, for all will be naught else
But Spirit's own perfect knowledge of itself;
Yea, this dark mighty seeming of the world
Is but the Spirit's own power unsubdued;
And as the unruled vigours of thought in sleep
Crowd on the brain, and become dream therein,
So the strange outer forces of man's spirit
Are the appearing world. But all at last,
Subdued, becomes self-knowing ecstasy,
The whole world brightens into Spirit's desire.
This is for Spirit to be lord of life;
And man, with foolish hope looking for this,

Takes the ravishing drunkenness he hath
From us, for knowledge of the Spirit's power.
But it will come by love. It will be twain
Who go together to this height of mastery
Over the world, governing it as song
Is govern'd by the heart of him who sings;
But never one by means of one shall reach it:
Not man alone, nor woman alone, but each
Enabling each, together, twain in one.

[*The King's Messenger comes in.*

MESSENGER. I speak to the rebellious woman Vashti.
Thou art no more a Queen; thou hast no place
In the King's house, nor in the life of men:
Thus art thou judged. Go forth now; let the night
Befriend thee, for no other friend thou hast,
For the day shall reveal thee to men's eyes,
And they, obedient to the King, will hate thee.
Therefore be gone: and as the beasts have homes
In the wild ground, have thy home from henceforth.

VASHTI. Gives the King reason for this judgment?

MESSENGER. Yea;
Because thou art a danger to all marriage,
Because men are dishonoured in their rule
Of women by thy insult, thou art judged.

2ND WOMAN. But if the King had heard her crazy words
He would have put her where they tame with thongs
Maniacs.

4TH WOMAN. When the King hath slept, we will
To-morrow crave his presence, and will stand
In humble troop before him, thanking him
For that his virtue hath this wicked woman
Purged from among us, saved us from infection.

1ST WOMAN. Alas, my Queen! where lies thy journey now?

VASHTI. Ay, where to go? What shelter for me now
Will any of the dwelt earth dare to give?
My beauty as a branding now will mark me;
And shame will run before me, and await

My coming, wheresoever I would lodge.
For out of Shushan to the ends of the earth
Great news runs, with a hidden soundless speed
Through secret channels in the folks' dim mind,
As water races through smooth sloping gutters.
Swifter than any feet could bear the tale,
Going unheard, already posts abroad
A buried river, and will soon burst up
In towns and markets, far as the width of day,
A bubbling clamour, wonderful wild news:
'Vashti the Queen is judged and forced to go
Roaming the earth, outcast and infamous;
Look out for her! Be ready, if she comes,
With stones and hooting voices!'—Fare you well,
Women whom once I knew. You are quit of me:
Pardon me if I add, And I of you.

IV

Into the darkness fared the outcast Queen;
Fearless her face, and searching with proud gaze
The impenetrable hour. Behind her burned
The sky, held by the open kiln of the town
In a great breath of fire, yellow and red,
From out the festival streets, and myriad links.
Still might she taste, and still must choke to taste,
The fragrance of sweet oils and gums aflame
Capturing the cool night with spicy riches;
Still after her through the hollow moveless air
The sounded ceremonies came, the cry
Of dainty lust in winding tune of fifes,
The silver fury of cymbals clamouring
Like frenzy in a woman-madden'd brain;
And drumming underneath the whole wild noise,
Like monstrous hatred underneath desire,
The thunder of the beaten serpent-skins.
Yea, in the town behind her, flaring Shushan,

She heard Man, meaning to adore himself,
Throned on the wealth of earth as God in heaven,
And making music of his glorying thought,
Merely betray the mastery of his blood,
His sexual heart, his main idolatry,—
Woman, and his lust to devour her beauty,
Himself devoured ceaselessly by her beauty.
And well she knew, to herself bitterly smiling,
How the King seated amid his fellow-kings
Devised his grievous rage, feeling himself
Insulted in his dearest mind, his rule
Over the precious pleasure of his women
Wounded: how the man's wrath would hiss and swell
Like gross spittle spat into red-hot coals.
But as the Queen fared through the blinded hour,
Sudden against the darkness of her eyes
There came a wind of light. Crimson it was,
With smoky lightnings braided, in its first
Swift surge into the gloom before her face;
But it began to golden, and became
Astonishingly white. And as she stood
With rigour in her nerves, a mighty shudder
Ravisht the light, and in the midst appeared
Vision, a goddess, terrible and kind;
And to the Queen the goddess spoke, in voice
That healed her anger with its quietness.

ISHTAR. I am the goddess Ishtar, and thou art
My servant. Wilt thou any help of me?

VASHTI. Am I then one whom gods may help? I am
By men judged hateful: surely I am thereby
Made over to the demons, and not thine.

ISHTAR. Yet art thou mine, because thou knowest well
Thou disobeyest me.

VASHTI. How do I so?

ISHTAR. I am the goddess of the power of women,
And passion in the hearts of men is my
Divinity.

VASHTI. Yea, then I disobey thee.
ISHTAR. And yet thou shalt not fear me wronging thee:
Tell me, O thou Despair, whither thou goest?
VASHTI. Thy taunt goes past me; I am not despair.
ISHTAR. Verily, but thou art. Is not thy mind
A hot revolter from the service due
To my divinity, passion in men's hearts?
Is there aught else that thou mayst serve? Thou knowest
There is naught else: therefore thou art Despair.
VASHTI. That I am infamous, I know. But even now,
Now when I learn I am to gods no more
Than to the lust of men, I will not be
Despair.
ISHTAR. Who means so greatly to serve pride,
That the service of the world is a thing loath'd,
Is desperate, avoided by mankind,
Unpleasing to the gods. We, who look down,
Know that the world and pride may both be served.
Yet also that it was too hard for thee
We know, and pardon. Thou shalt tell me now
Why thou refusest the life given thee.
VASHTI. Because I will not woman should be sin
Amid man's life. You gods have given man
Desire that too much knows itself; and thence
He is all confounded by the pleasure of us.
How sweetly doth the heart of man begin
Desiring us, how like music and the green
First happiness of the year! But this can grow
To uncontrollably crowding lust, beyond
All power of delight to utter, thence
Inwardly turned to anger and detesting!
Till, looking on us with strange eyes, man finds
We are not his desire: it was but sex
Inflamed, so that it roused the breaking forth
Of secret fury in him, consuming life,
Yea, even the life that would reach up to know
The heaven of gods above it.

ISHTAR. And what, for this,
Dost thou refuse?
VASHTI. I refuse woman's beauty!
Not merely to be feasting with delight
Man's senses, I refuse; but even his heart
I will not serve. Are we to be for ever
Love's passion in man, and never love itself?
Always the instrument, never the music?
ISHTAR. I have not done with man.—Thou sayest true,
Women are as a sin in life: for that
The gods have made mankind in double sex.
Sin of desiring woman is to be
The knowledgeable light within man's soul,
Whereby he kills the darken'd ache of being.
But shall I leave him there? or shall I leave
Woman amid these hungers? Nay: I hold
The rages of these fires as a soft clay
Obedient to my handling; there shall be
Of man desiring, and of woman desired,
A single ecstasy divinely formed,
Two souls knowing themselves as one amazement.
All that thou hatest to arouse in man
Prepareth him for this; and thou thyself
Art by thy very hate prepared: wherefore
The gods forgive thee, seeing what comes of thee.
Behold now! of my godhead I will make
Thy senses burn with vision, storying
The spirit of woman growing from loved to love.

The First Vision: Helen.

Helen am I, a name astonishing
The world, a fame that rings against the sky,
Like an alarm of brass smitten to sound
The news of war against the stone of mountains.
I move in power through the minds of men,
And have no power to hold my power back.
Men's passions fawn upon my feet, as waves

That fiercely fawn after the going wind;
But not as the wind, shaking off the foam
Of the pursuing lust of the moaning waves,
And over the clamour of the evil seas'
Monstrous word running lightly, unhurt.
They fawn upon me, all the lusts of the world,
Bewildering my steps with straining close,
And breathe their horrible spittle against me.
Passions cry round me with the yelling cry
Of dogs chained and starving and smelling blood.
Yea, for through me the world becomes a den
Of insane greed. In helpless beauty I stand
Alone in the midst of dreadful adoration;
And, round me thronged, the fawning, fawning lusts
Open their throats upon me and whine and lick
My feet with dripping tongues, or gaze to pant
Hot hunger in my face. For I am made
To set their hearts grim to possess my life,
And with an anger of love devour my beauty;
And yet to seal up in their mastered hearts
The rage, and bring them in croucht worship down
Before me, bent with impotent desire.
A quiet place the world was ere I came
A strife, a dream of fire, into its sleep;
And with their senses ended men's delights.
But I struck through their senses burning news
Of impossible endless things, and mixt
Wild lightning into their room of darkness.—Then
Agony, and a craving for delight
Escaping sensual grasp, began in men;
And the agony was poison in the health
Of sweet desire.—The joy of me men tried
To compass with strange frenzy and desire
Made new with cunning. But still at my feet
The lusts they tarr on me crouch down and fawn
And snarl to be so fearful of their prey.
I see men's faces grin with helpless lust

About me; crooked hands reach out to please
Their hot nerves with the flower of my skin;
I see the eyes imagining enjoyment,
The arms twitching to seize me, and the minds
Inflamed like the glee-kindled hearts of fiends.
And through the world the fawning, fawning lusts
Hound me with worship of a ravenous yearning:
And I am weary of maddening men with beauty.

The Second Vision: Sappho.

Into how fair a fortune hath man's life
Fallen out of the darkness!—This bright earth
Maketh my heart to falter; yea, my spirit
Bends and bows down in the delight of vision,
Caught by the force of beauty, swayed about
Like seaweed moved by the deep winds of water:
For it is all the news of love to me.
Through paths pine-fragrant, where the shaded ground
Is strewn with fruits of scarlet husk, I come,
As if through maidenhood's uncertainty,
Its darkness coloured with strange untried thoughts;
Hither I come, here to the flowery peak
Of this white cliff, high up in golden air,
Where glowing earth and sea and divine light
Are in mine eyes like ardour, and like love
Are in my soul: love's glowing gentleness,
The sunny grass of meadows and the trees,
Towers of dark green flame, and that white town
Where from the hearths, a fragrance of burnt wood,
Blue purple smoke creeps like a stain of wine
Along the paved blue sea: yea, all this kindness
Lies amid salt immeasurable flowing,
The power of the sea, passion of love.
I, Sappho, have made love the mastery
Most sacred over man; but I have made it
A safety of things gloriously known,
To house his spirit from the darkness blowing

Out of the vast unknown: from me he hath
The wilful mind to make his fortune fair.
Yea, here I stand for the whole earth to see
How life, breathing its fortune like sweet air,
Mixing it with the kindled heart of man,
May utter it proud against the double truth
Of darkness fronting him and following him,
In a prevailing, burning, marvellous lie!
And it is love kindles the burning of it,
The quivering flame of spoken-forth desire,
Which man hath made his place within the world,—
Love, learnt of Sappho! and not only bright
With gladness: I have devised an endless pain,
The fearful spiritual pain of love, to hold
In a firm fire, unalterably bright,
The shining forth of Spirit's imagination
Declared against the investing dark, a light
Of pain and joy, equal for man and woman.

The Third Vision: Theresa.

Come, golden bridegroom, break this mortal night,
Five times chained with darkness of my senses.
At last now visit my desire, and turn
Thy feet, and the flaming path of thy feet,
Unto these walls lockt round me like a death.
Death I would have them till thou comest; yea,
The earthly stone whereof man's fortune here
Is made, strongly into deliberate death
I have built about my soul, to fend its life
From gazes of the world. I am too proud
To endure the world's desire of my beauty;
I know myself too marvellous in love
To be the joy of aught that thou hast made:
I am to be bride of thee, of the world's maker.
O God, the heart I have from thee, the heart
Uttering itself in an endless word of love,
Is sealed up in the stone of worldly night:

Set hitherward the flaming way of thy feet,
Break my night, and enter in unto me.
Come, wed my spirit; and like as the sea,
Into the shining spousal ecstasy
Of sun and wind, riseth in cloudy gleam,
So let the knowing of my flesh be clouds
Of fire, mounting up the height of my spirit,
Fire clouding with flame the marriage hour
Wherein my spirit keeps thy dreadful light
Away from Heaven in a bridal kiss,—
Fire of bodily sense in spiritual glee
Held, as fire of water in sunlit air.
Ah God, beautiful God, my soul is wild
With love of thee. Hitherward turn thy feet,
Turn their golden journeying towards this night,—
This night of cavernous earth; and now let shine
These walls of stone, against thy nearing love,
Like pure glass smitten by the power of the sun;
And let them be, in thy descending love,
Like glass in a furnace, falling molten down,
Back from thy burning feet streaming and flowing,
Leaving me naked to thy bright desire.—
Enjoy me, God, enjoy thy bride to-night.

VASHTI. Too well I know the first, the scarlet-clad;
And she, that was in shining white and gold,
Was as the sound of bees and waters, at last
Heard by one long closed in the dins of madness.
But what was she, the black-robed, with the eyes
So fearfully alight, the last who spoke?

ISHTAR. Take none of these for perfect: they are moods
Purifying my women to become
My unexpressive, uttermost intent.—
As music binds into a strict delight
The manifold random sounds that shake the air,
Even so fashioned must I have the being
That fills with rushing power the boundless spirit:
Amidst it, musically firm, a joy

That is a fiery knowledge of itself,
Thereby self-continent, a globèd fire.
And she who gave thee wonder, is the sign
Of those who firmest, brightest hold their being
Fastened and seized in one enjoyed desire.
Yet even they are but a making ready
For what I perfectly intend: in them
Joy of self-bound desire hath burnt itself
To extreme purity; I am free thereby
To work my meaning through them, my divinity.
Yea, such clean fire in man and such in woman
To mingle wonderfully, that the twain
Become a moment of one blazing flame
Infinitely upward towering, far beyond
The endless fate of spirit in the world.
But in the way to this are maladies
And anguish; and as a perilous bridge
Over the uncontrolled demanding world,
Virginity, passionate self-possessing,
Must build itself supreme, unbreakable.
——I leave thee: as thou mayst, be comforted
By prophecy of what I mean in life.
Against thee is not Heaven; and thou must
Endure the hatred men will throw upon thee.

. . . . . .

The shining place where Ishtar looked at her
Empty the Queen beheld; and into mist
The glory fainted, and the stars came through
Untroubled. Into the night the Queen went on.

PART II

IMPERFECTION

MARY

[A LEGEND OF THE FORTY-FIVE]

I

A street in Carlisle leading to the Scottish Gate. Three girls, Mary, Katrina, and Jean.

KATRINA. What a year this has been!

MARY. There's many a lass
Will blench to hear the date of it—Forty-five,—
Poor souls! Why will the men be fighting so,
Running away to find out death, as if
It were some tavern full of light and fiddling?
And when the doors are shut, what of the girls
Who gave themselves away, and still must live?
Are not men thoughtless?

KATRINA. Leaving only kisses
To be remembered by.

JEAN. That's not so bad
As when the dead lads went beyond kissing.

MARY. Poor souls! Well, Carlisle has at least three hearts
That are not crying for a lad who's gone
Listening to the lean old Crowder, Death.
We needn't mope: and yet it's sad.

JEAN. Come on,
Why are we dawdling? All the heads are up,
Steepled on spikes above the Scottish Gate,—
Some of the rebels rarely handsome too.

MARY. Won't it be rather horrible?

KATRINA. A row
Of chopt-off heads sitting on spikes—ugh!

JEAN. Yes,
And I dare say blood dribbling here and there.
MARY. Don't, Jean! I am going back. I was
Forbid the gate.
KATRINA. And so was I.
JEAN. And I.
KATRINA. But a mere peep at them?
JEAN. Yes, come on, Mary.
MARY. We might just see how horrible they are.
JEAN. Sure, they will make us shudder.
KATRINA. Or else cry.
[*A Man meets them.*
MAN. Are you for the show, my girls?
JEAN. We aren't your girls.
KATRINA. Do you mean the heads upon the Scottish Gate?
MAN. Ay, that's the show, a pretty one.
JEAN. Are all
The rebels' heads set up?
MAN. All, all; their cause
Is fallen flat; but go you on and see
How wonderly their proud heads are elate.
KATRINA. Do any look as if they died afeared?
MAN. Go and learn that yourselves. And when you mark
How grimly addled all the daring is
Now in those brains, do as your hearts shall bid you,
And that is weep, I hope.
MARY. O let's go back.
JEAN. We have no friends spiked on the Scottish Gate.
MAN. No? Well, there's quite a quire of voices there,
Blessing the King's just wisdom for his stern
Strong policy with the rebels.
MARY. Who are those?—
I think it's fiendish to have killed so many.
MAN. The chattering birds, my lass, and droning flies:
They're proper Whigs, are birds and flies,—or else
The Whigs are proper crows and carrion-bugs.
[*He goes on past them.*

KATRINA. A Jacobite?
JEAN. That's it, I warrant you.
One of the stay-at-homes.
MARY. Now promise me,
We'll only take a glimpse, girls, a short glimpse.
JEAN [*laughing*]. Yes, just to see how horrible they are.
[*They go on towards the gate*

II

The Scottish Gate, Carlisle. Among the crowd.

MARY. O why did we come here?
JEAN. One, two, three, four—
A devil's dozen of them at the least.
KATRINA. Poor lads! They did not need to set them up
So high, surely. Which is the one you'ld call
Prettiest, Jean?
JEAN. That fellow with the sneer;
The axe's weight could not ruffle his brow,—
How signed it is with scorn!
KATRINA. Ah yes, he's dark
And you are red: Mary and I will choose
Some golden fellow. Which do you think, Mary?
JEAN. O, but mine is the one! Look—do you see?—
He must have put his curls away from the axe;
Or did they part themselves when he knelt down,
And let the stroke have his nape white and bare?
O could a girl not nestle snug and happy
Against a neck, with such hair covering her!
KATRINA. Now, Mary, we must make our yellow choice;
You've got good eyes; which do you fancy?—Jean!
What ails her?
JEAN. How she stares! which is the one
She singles out? That topmost boy it is,—
Pretty enough for a flaxen poll indeed.
Is that your lad, Mary?
KATRINA. She's ill or fey;
They are too much for her; and I truly

Am nearly weeping for them and their wives and lasses.
Her eyes don't budge! She's fastened on his face
With just the look that one would have to greet
The ghost of one's own self. See, all her blood
Is trapt in her heart,—pale she is as he.

A MAN IN THE CROWD. Can't you see she's fainting? 'Tis no sight
For halfling girls.

JEAN. Halfling yourself.

KATRINA. Mary!

MARY. Let us go home now: help me there, Katrina.

KATRINA. Yes, dear, but are you ill?

MARY. No: let us go home.

KATRINA [*to Jean*]. Come, Jean. Did you not hear her gasp?
We must
Be with her on her way home.

JEAN. You go then.
I've not lookt half enough at these. Besides——
[*Mary and Katrina go.*
Well, sir, how dare you speak to girls like that,
When they're alone?

THE MAN. You needn't be so short;
I guess you're one to take fine care of yourself.

JEAN. Yes, and I'ld choose a better-looking man
Than you, my chap, if I wanted company.

THE MAN. Come this way, you'll see better.

JEAN. Impudence!
Who said your arm might be there?

THE MAN. O, it's all right.

JEAN. And what do you think of the rebels now they're dead?

III

MARY *lying awake in bed.*

O let me reason it out calmly! Have I
No stars to take me through this terror, poured
Suddenly, dreadfully, on to my heart and spirit?
Why is it I, of all the world I only

Who must so love against nature? I knew
Always, that not like harbour for a boat,
Not a smooth safety, Love would take my soul;
But like going naked and empty-handed
Into the glitter and hiss of a wild sword-play,
I should fall in love, and in fear and danger:
But a danger of white light, a fear of sharpness
Keen and close to my heart, not as it proves,—
My heart hit by a great dull mace of terror!

. . . . .

So it has come to me, my hope, my wonder!
Now I perceive that I was one of those
Who, till love comes, have breath and beating blood
In one continual question. All the beauty
My happy senses took till now has been
Drugg'd with a fiery want and discontent,
That settled in my soul and lay there burning.
The hills, wearing their green ample dresses
Right in the sky's blue courts, with swerving folds
Along the rigour of their stony sinews—
(Often they garr'd my breath catch and stumble),—
The moon that through white ghost of water went,
Till she was ring'd about with an amber window,—
The summer stars seen winking through dusk leaves;
All the earth's manners and most loveliness,
All made my asking spirit stir within me,
And throb with a question, whose answer is,
(As now I know, but then I did not know)
There is a Man somewhere meant for me.—
And I have seen the face of him for whom
My soul was made!
Ah, somewhere? Where is that?
Have I not dreamt that he is gone away,
Gone ere he loved me? Now I lose myself.
I only have seen my boy's murder'd head.

. . . . .

Yes, again light breaks through and quells my thought.
The whole earth seemed as it belonged to me,
A message spoken out in green and blue
Specially to my heart; and it would say
That some time, out of the human multitude
A face would look into my soul, and sign
All my nature, easily as it were wax,
With its dear image; but after that impress
I would all harden, so that nought could raze
The minting of that seal from off my being.
And yesterday it fell. An idle whim
To see the rebels on the Scottish Gate,—
And there was the face of him I was made to love,
There,—ah God,—on the gate, my murder'd lad!
Did any girl have first-sight love like this?
Not to have ever seen him, only seen
Such piteous token that he has been born,
Lived and grown up to beauty, the man who was meant
To sleep upon my breast, and dead before
The sweet custom of love could be between us!
To have but seen his face?—Is that enough
To make me clear he is my man indeed?
Why, sure there are tales bordering on my lot
In misery?—Of hearts who have been stabbed
By knowledge that their mates were in the earth,
Yet never could come near enough to be healed;
Of those who have gone longing all a life,
Because a voice heard singing or a gesture
Seen from afar gospell'd them of love;
And no more than the mere announcement had.
Ah, but all these to mine were kindly dealing;
For not till they'd trepann'd him out of life
Did he, poor laggard, come to claim my soul.—
O my love, but your ears played you falsely
When they were taken by Death's wily tunes!

. . . . . .

Am I so hardly done to, who have seen
My lover's face, been near enough to worship
The very writing of his spirit in flesh?
For having that in my ken, I am not far
From loving with my eyes all his body.
What a set would his shoulders have, and neck,
To bear his goodly-purposed head; what gait
And usage of his limbs!—Ah, do you smile?
Why, even so I knew your smile would be,
Just such an over-brimming of your soul.
O love, love, love, then you have come to me!
How I have stayed aching for you! Come close,
Here's where you should have been long time, long time.
It is your rightful place. And I had left
Thinking you'ld come and kiss me over my heart!
Ah lad, my lad, they told me you were dead.

IV

At Dawn. The Scottish Gate.

MARY [*on her way to the gate, singing to herself*].

As a wind that has run all day
  Among the fragrant clover,
At evening to a valley comes;
  So comes to me my lover.

And as all night a honey'd warmth
  Stays where the wind did lie,
So when my lover leaves my arms
  My heart's all honey.

But what have I to do with this? And when
Was that song put in hiding 'mid my thought?
I might be on my way to meet and give
Good morrow to my——Ah! last night, last night!
O fie! I must not dream so. [*At the Gate*
It *was* I!

I am the girl whose lover they have killed,
Who never saw him until out of death
He lookt into my soul. I was to meet
Somewhere in life my lover, and behold,
He has turned into an inn I dare not enter,
And gazes through a window at my soul
Going on labour'd with this loving body.—
Did I not sleep last night with you in my arms?
I could have sworn it. Why should body have
So large a part in love? For if 'twere only
Spirit knew how to love, an easy road
My feet had down to death. But I must want
Lips against mine, and arms marrying me,
And breast to kiss with its dear warmth my breast,—
Body must love! O me, how it must ache
Before it is as numb as thine, dear boy!
Poor darling, didst thou forget that I was made
To wed thee, body and soul? For surely else
Thou hadst not gone from life.—
Ah, folk already,
Coming to curse the light with all their stares.

V

Katrina and Jean.

KATRINA. Where are you off to, Jean, in such a tear?
JEAN. I'm busy.
KATRINA. O you light-skirts! who is it now?
You think I can't guess what your business is?
Is it aught fresh, or only old stuff warmed?
JEAN. Does not the smartness in your wits, Katrina,
Make your food smack sourly?—Well, this time,
It's serious with me. I believe I'm caught.
KATRINA. O but you've had such practice in being caught,
You'll break away quite easily when you want.
Tell me now who it is.

JEAN. The man who spoke
When we were at the Scottish Gate that day.
O, he's a dapper boy! Did you mark his eyes?
KATRINA. Nay, I saw nought but he was under-grown.
JEAN. Pooh! He can carry me.
KATRINA. Jean, have you heard
Of Mary lately?—I vow she's in love.
JEAN. Never! with whom?
KATRINA. The thing's a wonder, Jean.
She'll speak to no one now, and every day,
Morning and evening, she's at the gate
Gazing like a fey creature on that head
She was so stricken to behold—you mind it?—
I tell you she's in love with it.
JEAN. O don't be silly.
How can you fall in love with a dead man?
And what good could he do you, if you did?
One loves for kisses and for hugs and the rest;
A spunky fellow,—that's the thing to love.
But a dead man,—pah, what a foolery!
KATRINA. O yes, to you; for Love's a game for you.
'Twill turn out dangerous maybe, but still,—a game.
JEAN. Yes, the best kind of game a girl can play,
And all the better for the risk, Katrina.
But where the fun would be in Love if he
You played with had not heart to jump, nor blood
To tingle, nothing in him to go wild
At seeing you betray your love for him,
Beats me to understand. You'ld be as wise
Blowing the bellows at a pile of stone
As loving one that never lived for you.
It isn't just to make a wind you blow,
But to turn red fire into white quivering heat.
Whatever she's after, 'tis not love, my girl:
I know what love is. But perhaps she saw
The poor lad living? Even had speech with him?
KATRINA. Not she; Mary has never known a lad

I did not know as well. We've shared our lives
As if we had been sisters, and I'm sure
She's never been in love before.

JEAN. Before?
Don't talk such sentimental nonsense—

KATRINA. Why,
If Love-at-first-sight can mean anything,
Surely 'tis this: there's some one in the world
Whom, if you come across him, you must love,
And you could no more pass his face unmoved
Than the year could go backwards. Well, suppose
He dies just ere you meet him; and he dead,
Ay, or his head alone, is given your eyes,
It is enough: he is the man for you,
All as if he were quick and signalling
His heart to you in smiles.

JEAN. Believe me, dear,
You've no more notion of the thing called Love
Than a grig has of talking. But I have,
And I'm off now to practise with my notions.

KATRINA. Now which is the real love,—hers or Mary's?

VI

Before Dawn. At the Scottish Gate.

MARY. Beloved, beloved!—O forgive me
That all these days questioning I have been,
Struggled with doubts. Your power over me,
That here slipt through the nets death caught you in,
Lighted on me so greatly that my heart
Could scarcely carry the amazement. Now
I am awake and seeing; and I come
To save you from this post of ignominy.
A ladder I have filcht and thro' the streets
Borne it, on shoulders little used to weight.
You'll say that I should not have bruised myself?—

But it is good, and an ease for me, to have
Some ache of body.—Now if there's any chink
In death, surely my love will reach to thee,
Surely thou wilt be ware of how I go
Henceforth through life utterly thine. And yet
Pardon what now I say, for I must say it.
I cannot thank thee, my dear murder'd lad,
For mastering me so. What other girls
Might say in blessing on their sweethearts' heads,
How can I say? They are well done to, when
Love of a man their beings like a loom
Seizes, and the loose ends of purposes
Into one beautiful desire weaves.
But love has not so done to me: I was
A nature clean as water from the hills,
One that had pleased the lips of God; and now
Brackish I am, as if some vagrom malice
Had trampled up the springs and made them run
Channelling ancient secrecies of salt.
O me, what, has my tongue these bitter words
In front of my love's death? Look down, sweetheart,
From the height of thy sacred ignominy
And see my shame. Nay, I will come up to thee
And have my pardon from thy lips, and do
The only good I can to thee, sweetheart.

. . . . .

I have done it: but how have I done it?
And what's this horrible thing to do with me?
How came it on the ground, here at my feet?
O I had better have shirkt it altogether!
What do I love? Not this; this is only
A message that he left on earth for me,
Signed by his spirit, that he had to go
Upon affairs more worthy than my love.
We women must give place in our men's thoughts
To matters such as those.

God, God, why must I love him? Why
Must life be all one scope for the hawking wings
Of Love, that none the mischief can escape?—
Well, I am thine for always now, my love,
For this has been our wedding. No one else,
Since thee I have had claspt unto my breast,
May touch me lovingly.—
Light, it is light!
What shall I do with it, now I have got it?
O merciful God, must I handle it
Again? I dare not; what is it to me?
Let me off this! Who is it clutches me
By the neck behind? Who has hold of me
Forcing me stoop down? Love, is it thou?
Spare me this service, thou who hast all else
Of my maimed life: why wilt thou be cruel?
O grip me not so fiercely, Love! Ah no,
I will not: 'tis abominable——

JEAN

I

The Parlour of a Public House. Two young men, Morris and Hamish.

HAMISH. Come, why so moody, Morris? Either talk,
Or drink, at least.
MORRIS. I'm wondering about Love.
HAMISH. Ho, are you there, my boy? Who may it be?
MORRIS. I'm not in love; but altogether posed
I am by lovers.
HAMISH. They're a simple folk:
I'm one.
MORRIS. It's you I'm mainly thinking of.
HAMISH. Why, that's an honour, surely.
MORRIS. Now if I loved
The girl you love, your Jean, (look where she goes
Waiting on drinkers, hearing their loose tongues;
And yet her clean thought takes no more of soil
Than white-hot steel laid among dust can take!)—
HAMISH. You not in love, and talking this fine stuff?
MORRIS. I say, if I loved Jean, I'ld do without
All these vile pleasures of the flesh, your mind
Seems running on for ever: I would think
A thought that was always tasting them would make
The fire a foul thing in me, as the flame
Of burning wood, which has a rare sweet smell,
Is turned to bitter stink when it scorches flesh.
HAMISH. Why specially Jean?
MORRIS. Why Jean? The girl's all spirit!
HAMISH. She's a lithe burd, it's true; that, I suppose,
Is why you think her made of spirit,—unless
You've seen her angry: she has a blazing temper.—
But what's a girl's beauty meant for, but to rouse

Lust in a man? And where's the harm in that,—
In loving her because she's beautiful,
And in the way that drives me?—I dare say
My spirit loves her too. But if it does
I don't know what it loves.

MORRIS. Why, man, her beauty
Is but the visible manners of her spirit;
And this you go to love by the filthy road
Which all the paws and hoofs in the world tread too!
God! And it's Jean whose lover runs with the herd
Of grunting, howling, barking lovers,—Jean!—

HAMISH. O spirit, spirit, spirit! What is spirit?
I know I've got a body, and it loves:
But who can tell me what my spirit's doing,
Or even if I have one?

MORRIS. Well, it's strange,
My God, it's strange. A girl goes through the world
Like a white sail over the sea, a being
Woven so fine and lissom that her life
Is but the urging spirit on its journey,
And held by her in shape and attitude.
And all she's here for is that you may clutch
Her spirit in the love of a mating beast!

HAMISH. Why, she has fifty lovers if she has one,
And fifty's few for her.

MORRIS. I'm going out.
If the night does me good, I'll come back here
Maybe, and walk home with you.

HAMISH. O don't bother.
If I want spirit, it will be for drinking. [*Morris goes out.*
Spirit or no, drinking's better than talking.
Who was the sickly fellow to invent
That crazy notion spirit, now, I wonder?
But who'd have thought a burly lout like Morris
Would join the brabble? Sure he'll have in him
A pint more blood than I have; and he's all
For loving girls with words, three yards away!

Jean comes in.

JEAN. Alone, my boy? Who was your handsome friend?
HAMISH. Whoever he was he 's gone. But I'm still here.
JEAN. O yes, you're here; you're always here.
HAMISH. Of course,
And you know why.
JEAN. Do I? I've forgotten.
HAMISH. Jean, how can you say that? O how can you?
JEAN. Now don't begin to pity yourself, please.
HAMISH. Ah, I am learning now; it 's truth they talk.
You would undo the skill of a spider's web
And take the inches of it in one line,
More easily than know a woman's thought.
I'm ugly on a sudden?
JEAN. The queer thing
About you men is that you will have women
Love in the way you do. But now learn this;
We don't love fellows for their skins; we want
Something to wonder at in the way they love.
A chap may be as rough as brick, if you like,
Yes, or a mannikin and grow a tail,—
If he 's the spunk in him to love a girl
Mainly and heartily, he 's the man for her.—
My soul, I've done with all you pretty men;
I want to stand in a thing as big as a wind;
And I can only get your paper fans!
HAMISH. You've done with me? You wicked Jean! You'll dare
To throw me off like this? After you've made,
O, made my whole heart love you?
JEAN. You are no good.
Your friend, now, seems a likely man; but you?—
I thought you were a torch; and you're a squib.
HAMISH. Not love you enough? Death, I'll show you then.
JEAN. Hands off, Hamish. There 's smoke in you, I know,
And splutter too. Hands off, I say.

HAMISH. By God,
Tell me to-morrow there's no force in me!
JEAN. Leave go, you little beast, you're hurting me:
I never thought you'ld be so strong as this.
Let go, or I'll bite; I mean it. You young fool,
I'm not for you. Take off your hands. O help!
[*Morris has come in unseen and rushes forward.*
MORRIS. You beast! You filthy villainous fellow!—Now,
I hope I've hurt the hellish brain in you.
Take yourself off. You'll need a nurse to-night.
[*Hamish slinks out.*
Poor girl! And are you sprained at all? That ruffian!
JEAN. O sir, how can I thank you? You don't know
What we poor serving girls must put up with.
We don't hear many voices like yours, sir.
They think, because we serve, we've no more right
To feelings than their cattle. O forgive me
Talking to you. You don't come often here.
MORRIS. No, but I will: after to-night I'll see
You take no harm. And as for him, I'll smash him.
JEAN. Yes, break the devil's ribs,—I mean,—O leave me;
I'm all distraught.
MORRIS. Good night, Jean. My name's Morris.
JEAN. Good night, Morris—dear. O I must thank you.
[*She suddenly kisses him.*
Perhaps,—perhaps, you'll think that wicked of me?
MORRIS. You wicked? O how silly!—But—good night.
[*He goes.*
JEAN. The man, the man! What luck! My soul, what luck!

II

Jean by herself, undressing.

Yes, he's the man. Jean, my girl, you're done for,
At last you're done for, the good God be thankt.—
That was a wonderful look he had in his eyes:
'Tis a heart, I believe, that will burn marvellously!

Now what a thing it is to be a girl!
Who'ld be a man? Who'ld be fuel for fire
And not the quickening touch that sets it flaming?—
'Tis true that when we've set him well alight
(As I, please God, have set this Morris burning)
We must be serving him like something worshipt;
But is it to a man we kneel? No, no;
But to our own work, to the blaze we kindled!
O, he caught bravely. Now there's nothing at all
So rare, such a wild adventure of glee,
As watching love for you in a man beginning;
To see the sight of you pour into his senses
Like brandy gulpt down by a frozen man,
A thing that runs scalding about his blood;
To see him holding himself firm against
The sudden strength of wildness beating in him!
O what my life is waiting for, at last
Is started, I believe: I've turned a man
To a power not to be reckoned; I shall be
Held by his love like a light thing in a river!

III

Morris by himself.

It is a wonder! Here's this poor thing, Life,
Troubled with labours of the endless war
The lusty flesh keeps up against the spirit;
And down amid the anger—who knows whence?—
Comes Love, and at once the struggling mutiny
Falls quiet, unendurably rebuked:
And the whole strength of life is free to serve
Spirit, under the regency of Love.
The quiet that is in me! The bright peace!
Instead of smoke and dust, the peace of Love!
Truly I knew not what a turmoil life
Has been, and how rebellious, till this peace
Came shining down! And yet I have seen things,

And heard things, that were strangely meaning this,—
Telling me strangely that life can be all
One power undisturbed, one perfect honour,—
Waters at noonday sounding among hills,
Or moonlight lost among vast curds of cloud;—
But never knew I it is only Love
Can rule the noise of life to heavenly quiet.
Ah, Jean, if thou wilt love me, thou shalt have
Never from me upon thy purity
The least touch of that eager baseness, known,
For shame's disguising, by the name of Love
Most wickedly; thou shalt not need to fear
Aught from my love, for surely thou shalt know
It is a love that almost fears to love thee.

IV

The Public House. Morris and Jean.

JEAN. O, you are come again!
MORRIS. Has he been here,
That blackguard, with some insolence to you?
JEAN. Who?
MORRIS. Why, that Hamish.
JEAN. Hamish? No, not he.
MORRIS. I thought—you seemed so breathless—
JEAN. But you've come
Again! May I not be glad of your coming?
Yes, and a little breathless?—Did you come
Only because you thought I might be bullied?
MORRIS. O, no, no, no! Only for you I came.
JEAN. And that's what I was hoping.
MORRIS. If you could know
How it has been with me, since I saw you!
JEAN. What can I know of your mind?—For my own
Is hard enough to know,—save that I'm glad
You've come again,—and that I should have cried
If you'd not kept your word.

MORRIS. My word?—to see
Hamish does nothing to you?
JEAN. The fiend take Hamish!
Do you think I'ld be afraid of him?—It's you
I ought to be afraid of, were I wise.
MORRIS. Good God, she's crying!
JEAN. —Cannot you understand?
MORRIS. O darling, is it so? I prayed for this
All night, and yet it's unbelievable.
JEAN. You too, Morris?
MORRIS. There's nothing living in me
But love for you, my sweetheart.
JEAN. And you are mine,
My sweetheart!—And now, Morris, now you know
Why you are the man that ought to frighten me!—
Morris, I love you so!
MORRIS. O, but better than this,
Jean, you must love me. You must never think
I'm like the heartless men you wait on here,
Whose love is all a hunger that cares naught
How hatefully endured its feasting must be
By her who fills it, so it be well glutted!
JEAN. I did not say I was afraid of you;
But only that, perhaps, I ought to be.
MORRIS. No, no, you never ought. My love is one
That will not have its passion venturous;
It knows itself too fine a ceremony
To risk its whole perfection even by one
Unruly thought of the luxury in love.
Nay, rather it is the quietness of power,
That knows there is no turbulence in life
Dare the least questioning hindrance set against
The onward of its going,—therefore quiet,
All gentle. But strong, Jean, wondrously strong!
JEAN. Yes, love is strong. I have well thought of that.
It drops as fiercely down on us as if
We were to be its prey. I've seen a gull

That hovered with beak pointing and eyes fixt
Where, underneath its swaying flight, some fish
Was trifling, fooling in the waves: then, souse!
And the gull has fed. And love on us has fed.

MORRIS. Indeed 'tis a sudden coming; but I grieve
To hear you make of love a cruelty.
Sweetheart, it shall be nothing cruel to you!
You shall not fear, in doing what love bids,
Ever to know yourself unmaidenly.
For see! here's my first kiss; and all my love
Is signed in it; and it is on your hand.—
Is that a thing to fear?—But it were best
I go now. This should be a privacy,
Not even your lover near, this hour of first
Strange knowledge that you have accepted love.
I think you would feel me prying, if I stayed
While your heart falters into full perceiving
That you are plighted now for ever mine.
God bless you, Jean, my sweetheart.—Not a word?
But you will thank me soon for leaving you:
'Tis the best courtesy I can do. [*He goes.*

JEAN. O, and I thought it was my love at last!
I thought, from the look he had last night, I'd found
That great, brave, irresistible love!—But this!
It's like a man deformed, with half his limbs.
Am I never to have the love I dream and need,
Pouring over me, into me, winds of fire?

Hamish comes in.

HAMISH. Well? What's the mood to-night?—The girl's been crying!
This should be something queer.

JEAN. It's you are to blame:
You brought him here!

HAMISH. It's Morris this time, is it?
And what has he done?

JEAN. He's insulted me.
And you must never let me see him again.
HAMISH. Sure I don't want him seeing you. But still,
If I'm to keep you safe from meeting him—
JEAN. To look in his eyes would mortify my heart!
HAMISH. Then you'ld do right to pay me.
JEAN. What you please.
HAMISH. A kiss?
JEAN. Of course; as many as you like—
And of any sort you like.

KATRINA

I

On the sea-coast. Three young men, Sylvan, Valentine, and Francis.

VALENTINE. Well, I suppose you're out of your fear at last,
Sylvan. This land 's empty enough; naught here
Feminine but the hens, bitches, and cows.
Now we are safe!

FRANCIS. Horribly safe; for here,
If there are wives at all, they are salted so
They have no meaning for the blood, bent things
Philosophy allows not to be women.

VALENTINE. But think of the husbands that must spend their nights
Alongside skin like bark. It is the men
That have the tragedy in these weather'd lands.

FRANCIS. No thought of that! We are monks now. And, indeed,
This is a cloister that a man could like,
This blue-aired space of grassy land, that here,
Just as it touches the sea's bitter mood,
Is troubled into dunes, as it were thrilled,
Like a calm woman trembling against love.

SYLVAN. Woman again!—How, knowing you, I failed
So long to know the truth, I cannot think.

FRANCIS. And what 's the truth?

SYLVAN. Woman and love of her
Is as a dragging ivy on the growth
Of that strong tree, man's nature!

VALENTINE. Yes. But now
Tell us a simpler sort of truth. Was she——

SYLVAN. She? Who?

VALENTINE. Katrina, of course: who else, when one
Speaks of a she to you?

SYLVAN. And what about her?
VALENTINE. Was she too cruel to you, or too kind?
SYLVAN. Ah, there 's no hope for men like you; you're sunk
Above your consciences in smothering ponds
Of sweet imagination,—drowned in woman!
FRANCIS. Ay? Clarence and the Malmsey over again;
'Twas a delightful death.
VALENTINE. But you forget,
Sylvan, we've come as your disciples here.
SYLVAN. Yes, to a land where not the least desire
Need prey upon your mettle. There are hours
A god might gladly take in these basking dunes,—
Nothing but summer and piping larks, and air
All a warm breath of honey, and a grass
All flowers—sweet thyme and golden heart's-ease here!
And under scent and song of flowers and birds,
Far inland out of the golden bays the air
Is charged with briny savour, and whispered news
Gentle as whitening oats the breezes stroke.
What good is all this health to you? You bring
Your own thoughts with you; and they are vinegar,
Endlessly rusting what should be clear steel.
FRANCIS. I do begin to doubt our enterprise,
The grand Escape from Woman. It lookt brave
And nobly hazardous afar off, to cease
All wenching, whether in deed or word or thought.
And yet I fear pride egged us. We had done
Better to be more humble, and bring here
A girl apiece.
VALENTINE. Yes, Sylvan; you must think
The cloister were a thing more comfortable
With your Katrina in it?
SYLVAN. My Katrina!
And do you think, supposing I would love,
I'ld bank in such a crazy safe as that
Katrina? One of those soft shy-spoken maids,
Who are only maids through fear? Whose life is all

A simpering pretence of modesty?
If it was love I wanted, 'twould not be
A dish of sweet stewed pears, laced with brandy.
But I can do without a woman's kisses.

VALENTINE. Can you?—You know full well, in the truth of your heart,
That there 's no man in all the world of men
Whose will woman's beauty cannot divide
Easily as a sword cuts jetting water.

SYLVAN. Have you not heard, that even jetting water
May have such spouting force, that it becomes
A rod of glittering white iron, and swords
Will beat rebounding on its speed in vain?—
Of such a force I mean to have my will.

[*He sits and stares moodily out to sea. His companions whisper to each other.*

VALENTINE. Here, Francis! Look you yonder. O but this,
This is the joke of the world!

FRANCIS. Hallo! a girl!
And, by the Lord, Katrina!—But why here?

VALENTINE. She 's followed him, of course; she 's heard of this
Mad escapade and followed after him.

FRANCIS. She has not seen us yet. Now what to do?

VALENTINE. Quick! Where 's your handkerchief? Truss his wrists and ankles,
And pull his coat up over his head and leave him!
He won't get free of her again; she'll lead
His wildness home and keep him tame for ever.
Now! [*They fall on him, bind him, and blindfold him.*

SYLVAN. What are you doing? Whatever are you doing?
Hell burn you, let me go!

VALENTINE. There 's worse to come.

[*They make off, and leave Sylvan shouting. Katrina runs in.*

KATRINA. Dear Heaven! Were they robbers? Have they hurt you? [*She releases him. He stands up.*

SYLVAN. Katrina!

KATRINA. Sylvan!
SYLVAN. How did you plot this?
I thought I'd put leagues between you and me.
KATRINA. Why have you come here?
SYLVAN. To find you, it seems.
But what you're doing here, that I'ld like to know.
KATRINA. I came to see my grandmother: she lives
All by herself, poor grannam, and it 's time
She had some help about the house, and care.
SYLVAN. Let 's have a better tale. You followed me.
KATRINA. Sylvan, how dare you make me out so vile?
SYLVAN. How dare you mean to make this body of mine
A thing with no thought in it but your beauty?
KATRINA. You shall not speak so wickedly. You've had
The half of my truth only: here 's the whole.
It was from you I fled! I hoped to make
My grannam's lonely cottage something safe
From you and what I hated in you.
SYLVAN. Love?—
Ah, so it 's all useless.
KATRINA. I feared to know
You wanted me,—horribly I feared it.
And now you've found me out.
SYLVAN. Is this the truth?—
No help for it, then.
KATRINA. O, I'm a liar to you!
SYLVAN. Strange how we grudge to be ruled! rather than be
Divinely driven to happiness, we push back
And fiercely try for wilful misery.—
Dearest, forgive me being cruel to you,
You who are in life like a heavenly dream
In the evil sleep of a sinner.
KATRINA. No, you hate me.
SYLVAN [*kissing her*]. Is this like hatred?
KATRINA [*in his arms*]. Sylvan, I have been
So wrencht and fearfully used. It was as if
This being that I live in had become

A savage endless water, wild with purpose
To tire me out and drown me.

SYLVAN. Yes, I know:
Like swimming against a mighty will, that wears
The cruelty, the race and scolding spray
Of monstrous passionate water.

KATRINA. Hold me, Sylvan:
I'm bruised with my sore wrestling.

SYLVAN. Ah, but now
We are not swimmers in this dangerous life.
It cannot beat upon our limbs with surf
Of water clencht against us, nor can waves
Now wrangle with our breath. Out of it we
Are lifted; and henceforward now we are
Sailors travelling in a lovely ship,
The shining sails of it holding a wind
Immortally pleasant, and the malicious sea
Smoothed by a keel that cannot come to wreck.

KATRINA. Alas, we must not stay together here.
Grannam will come upon us.

SYLVAN. Where is she?

KATRINA. Yonder, gathering driftwood for her fire.
There is a little bay not far from here,
The shingle of it a thronging city of flies,
Feeding on the dead weed that mounds the beach;
And the sea hoards there its vain avarice,—
Old flotsam, and decaying trash of ships.
An arm of reef half locks it in, and holds
The bottom of the bay deep strewn with seaweed,
A barn full of the harvesting of storms;
And at full tide, the little hampered waves
Lift up the litter, so that, against the light,
The yellow kelp and bracken of the sea,
Held up in ridges of green water, show
Like moss in agates. And there is no place
In all the coast for wreckage like this bay;
There often will my grannam be, a sack

Over her shoulders, turning up the crust
Of sun-dried weed to find her winter's warmth.

SYLVAN. Is that she coming?

KATRINA. O Sylvan, has she seen us?

SYLVAN. What matter if she has?

KATRINA. But it would matter!

SYLVAN. Katrina, come with me now! We'll go together
Back to my house.

KATRINA. No, no, not now! I must
Carry my grannam's load for her: 'tis heavy.

SYLVAN. We must not part again.

KATRINA. No, not for long;
For if we do, there will be storms again,
I know; and a fierce reluctance—O, a mad
Tormenting thing!—will shake me.

SYLVAN. Then come now!

KATRINA. Not now, not now! Look how my poor grannam
Shuffles under the weight; she 's old for burdens.
I must carry her sack for her.

SYLVAN. Well, to-night!

KATRINA. To-night?—O Sylvan! dare I?

SYLVAN. Yes, you dare!
You will be knowing I'm outside in the darkness,
And you will come down here and give me yourself
Wholly and for ever.

KATRINA. O not to-night!

SYLVAN. I shall be here, Katrina, waiting for you.

[*He goes.*

The old woman comes in burdened with her sack.

GRANDMOTHER. Katrina, that was a young man with you.

KATRINA. O grannam, you've had luck to-day; but now
It 's I must be the porter.

GRANDMOTHER [*giving up the sack*]. Ay, you take it.
It 's sore upon my back. You should have care
Of these young fellows; there 's a devil in them.
Never you talk with a man on the seashore

Or on hill-tops or in woods and suchlike places,
Especially if he 's one you think of marrying.
KATRINA. Marrying? I shall never be married!
GRANDMOTHER. Pooh!
That 's nonsense.
KATRINA. I should think 'twas horrible
Even to be in love and wanting to give
Yourself to another; but to be married too,
A man holding the very heart of you,—
GRANDMOTHER. He never does, honey, he never does.—
We're late; come along home.

II

In Sylvan's house. Sylvan and Katrina talking to each other and betweenwhiles talking to themselves.

SYLVAN. How pleasant and beautiful it is to be
At last obedient to love! (*To know*
Also, I've sold myself,—is that so pleasant?)
KATRINA. I cannot think, why such a glorious wealth
As this of love on our hearts should be spent.
What have we done, that all this gain be ours?
(*Nor can I think why my life should be mixt,*
Even its dearest secrecy, with another.)
SYLVAN. Ay, there 's the marvel! If to enter life
Needed some courage, 'twere a kind of wages,
As they let sacking soldiers take home loot:
But we are shuffled into life like puppets
Emptied out of a showman's bag; and then
Made spenders of the joys current in heaven!
(*Not such a marvel neither, if this love*
Be but the price I'm paid for my free soul.
Who 's the old trader that has lent this girl
The glittering cash of pleasure to pay me with?
Who is it,—the world, or the devil, or God—that wants
To buy me from myself?)
KATRINA. And then how vain

To think we can hold back from being enricht!
It is not only offered——
SYLVAN. No, 'tis a need
As irresistible within our hearts
As body's need of breathing. (*That I should be*
So avaricious of his gleaming price !)
KATRINA. And the instant force it has upon us, when
We think to use love as a privilege!
We are like bees that, having fed all day
On mountain-heather, go to a tumbling stream
To please their little honey-heated thirsts;
And soon as they have toucht the singing relief,
The swiftness of the water seizes them.
SYLVAN. And onward, sprawling and spinning, they are carried
Down to a drowning pool.
KATRINA. O Sylvan, drowning?
(*Deeper than drowning ! Why should it not be*
Our hearts need wish only what they delight in ?)
SYLVAN. Well, altogether gript by the being of love.
(*Yes, now the bargain's done; and I may wear,*
Like a cheated savage, scarlet dyes and strings
Of beaded glass, all the pleasure of love !)
KATRINA. It is a wonderful tyranny, that life
Has no choice but to be delighted love!
(*I know what I must do: I am to abase*
My heart utterly, and have nothing in me
That dare take pleasure beyond serving love.
Thus only shall I bear it: and perhaps—
Might I even of my abasement make
A passion, fearfully enjoying it ?)
SYLVAN. You are full of thoughts, sweetheart?
KATRINA. And so are you:
A long while since you kist me! (*What have I said ?*
O fool so to remind him ! I shall scarce
Help crying out or shuddering this time !—
Ah no; I am again a fool ! Not thus
I am to do, but in my heart to break

All the reluctance; it must have on me
No pleasure; else I am endlessly tortured.)
Then I must kiss you, Sylvan! [*She kisses him.*

SYLVAN. Ah, my darling!
(*God! it went through my flesh as thrilling sound*
Must shake a fiddle when the strings are snatcht!
Will she make the life in me all a slave
Of my kist body,—a trembling, eager slave?
It ran like a terror to my heart, the sense,
The shivering delight upon my skin,
Of her lips touching me.) My beloved,—
It may be it were wise, that we took care
Our pleasant love come never in the risk
Of being too much known.

KATRINA. O what a risk
To think of here! Love is not common life,
But always fresh and sweet. Can this grow stale?
[*She kisses him again.*

SYLVAN. O never! I meant not so.—Yes, always sweet!
(*She must not kiss me! Ah, it leaves my heart*
Aghast, and stopt with pain of the joy of her;
And her loved body is like an agony
Clinging upon me. O she must not kiss me!
I will not be a thing excruciated
To please her passion, an anguish of delight!)

PART III
VIRGINITY AND PERFECTION

JUDITH

I

The Besieged City of Bethulia.

JUDITH [*at the window of an upper room of her house*]

This pitiable city!—But, O God,
Strengthen me that I bend not into scorn
Of all this desperate folk; for I am weak
With pitying their lamentable souls.
Ah, when I hear the grief wail'd in the streets,
And the same breath their tears nigh strangle, used
To brag the God in them inviolate
And fighting off the hands of the heathen,—Lord,
Pardon me that I come so near to scorn;
Pardon me, soul of mine, that I have loosed
The rigour of my mind and leant towards scorn!—
Friends, wives and husbands, sons and daughters, dead
Of plague, famine, and arrows: and the houses
Battered unsafe by cannonades of stone
Hurled in by the Assyrians: the town-walls
Crumbling out of their masonry into mounds
Of foolish earth, so smitten by the rams:
The hunger-pangs, the thirst like swallowed lime
Forcing them gulp green water maggot-quick
That lurks in corners of dried cisterns: yea,
Murders done for a drink of blood, and flesh
Sodden of infants: and no hope alive
Of rescue from this heat of prisoning anguish
Until Assyrian swords drown it in death;—
These, and abandoned words like these, I hear

Daylong shrill'd and groan'd in the lanes beneath.
What needeth Holofernes more? The Jews,
The People of God, the Jews, lament their fortune;
Their souls are violated by the world;
Jewry is conquered; and the crop of men
Sown for the barns of God, is withered down,
Like feeblest grass flat-trodden by the sun,
In one short season of fear. Yea, swords and fire
Can do no more destruction on this folk:
A fierce untimely mowing now befits
This corn incapable of sacred bread,
This field unprofitable but to flame!
What should the choice of God do for a people,
But give them souls of temper to withstand
The trying of the furnace of the world?—
And they are molten, and from God's device
Unfashion'd, crazed in dismay; yea, God's skill
Fails in them, as the skill a founder put
In brass fails when the coals seize on his work.
For this fierce Holofernes and his power,
This torture poured on the city, is no more
Than a wild gust of wicked heat breathed out
Against our God-wrought souls by the world's furnace.
No new thing, this camp about the city:
Nebuchadnezzar and his hosted men
But fearfully image, like a madman's dream,
The fierce infection of the world, that waits
To soil the clean health of the soul and mix
Stooping decay into its upward nature.
Soul in the world is all besieged: for first
The dangerous body doth desire it;
And many subtle captains of the mind
Secretly wish against its fortune; next,
Circle on circle of lascivious world
Lust round the foreign purity of soul
For chance or violence to ravish it.
But the pure in the world are mastery.

Divinely do I know, when life is clean,
How like a noble shape of golden glass
The passions of the body, powers of the mind,
Chalice the sweet immortal wine of soul,
That, as a purple fragrance dwells in air
From vintage poured, fills the corrupting world
With its own savour. And here I am alone
Sound in my sweetness, incorrupt; the rest
(They noise it unashamed) are stuff gone sour;
The world has meddled with them. They have broacht
The wind that had pleas'd God to flocking thirst
Of flies and wasps, to fears and worldly sorrows.
Nay, they are poured out into the dung of the world,
And drench, pollute, the fortune of their state,
When they should have no fortune but themselves
And the God in them, and be sealed therein.
Ah, my sweet soul, that knoweth its own sweetness,
Where only love may drink, and only—alas!—
The ghost of love. But I am sweet for him,
For him and God, and for my sacred self!
But hark, a troop of new woe comes this way,
Making the street to ring and the stones wet
With cried despair and brackish agony.

Citizens lamenting in the street below.

They have crawled back like beasts dying of thirst,
The life all clotted in them. They went out
Soldiers, and back like beaten dogs they came
Breathing in whines, slow maimed four-footed things
On hands and knees degraded, groaning steps.
Their brains were full of battle, they were made
Of virtue, brave men; now in their brains shudder
Minds that cringe like children burnt with fever.
Often they stood to face the enemies' ranks
All upright as a flame in windless air,
Wearing their arm and the bright skill of swords
Like spirits clad in flashing fire of heaven;

And now in darken'd rooms they lie afraid
And whimper if the nurse moves suddenly.—
Ah God, that such an irresistible fiend,
Pain, in the beautiful housing of man's flesh
Should sleep, light as a leopard in its hunger,
Beside the heavenly soul; and at a wound
Leap up to mangle her, the senses' guest!—
That in God's country heathen men should do
This worse than murder on men full of God!

JUDITH. What matter of new wailing do your tongues
Wear in this shivering misery of sound?

A CITIZEN. The captains which were chosen to go out
And treat with Holofernes have come back.

JUDITH. And did the Ninevite demon treat with them?

A CITIZEN. The words they had from him were flaying knives,
And burning splinters fixt in their skinless flesh,
And stones thrown till their breasts were broken in.

JUDITH. What, torture our embassage?

A CITIZEN. Yea, for he means
Nothing but death to all the Jews he takes.

ANOTHER. There was a jeering word tied round the neck
Of each tormented man: 'Behold, ye Jews,
These chiefs of yours have learnt to crawl in prayer
Before the god Nebuchadnezzar; come,
Leave your city of thirst and your weak god,
And learn good worship even as these have learnt.'

ANOTHER. I saw them coming in: O horrible!
With broken limbs creeping along the ground—

JUDITH. Were I a man among you, I would not stay
Behind the walls to weep this insolence;
I'ld take a sword in my hand and God in my mind,
And seek under the friendship of the night
That tent where Holofernes' crimes and hate
Sleep in his devilish brain.

A CITIZEN. There is no night
Where Holofernes sleeps, as thou couldst tell,
Didst thou not shut thyself up in thine ease

Away from the noise and tears of common woe.
Come to the walls this evening, and I'll show thee
The golden place of light, the little world
Of triumphing glory framed in midst of the dark,
Pillar'd on four great bonfires fed with spice,
Enclosing in a globe of flame the tent
Wherein the sleepless lusts of Holofernes
Madden themselves all night, a revel-rout
Of naked girls luring him as he lies
Filling his blood with wine, the scented air
Injur'd marvellously with piping shrills
Of lechery made music, and small drums
That with a dancing throb drive his swell'd heart
Into desires beyond the strength of man.

JUDITH. And this beast is thine enemy, God!

ANOTHER CITIZEN. Nor beast,
Nor man, but one of those lascivious gods
Our lonely God detests, Chemosh or Baal,
Or Peor who goes whoring among women.

ANOTHER. And now come down braving in God's own land,
Pitching the glory of his fearful heaven
All night among God's hills.

JUDITH. You fools, he is
A life our God could snap as a woman snaps
Thread of her sewing.

A CITIZEN. Who shall break him off,
Who on the earth, from his huge twisted power?

ANOTHER. For in his brain, as in a burning-glass
Wide glow of sun drawn to a pin of fire,
Are gathered into incredible fierceness all
The rays of the dark heat of heathen strength.

ANOTHER. His eyes, they say, can kill a man.

ANOTHER. And sure
No murder could approach his flaming nights.

ANOTHER. Unless it came as a woman at whose beauty
His lust hath never sipt; for into his flesh
To drink unknown desirable limbs as wine

Torments him still, like a thirst when fever pours
A man's life out in drenching sweats.

JUDITH. Peace, peace;
The siege hath given you shameless tongues, and minds
No more your own: yea, the foul Ninevite
Hath mastered you already, for your thoughts
Dwell in his wickedness and marvel at it.
Hate not a thing too much, lest you be drawn
Wry from yourselves and close to the thing ye hate.

A CITIZEN. We know thy wisdom, Judith; but our lives
Belong to death; and wisdom to a man
Dying, is water in a broken jar.

JUDITH. Yea, if thou wilt die of a parching mouth.

A CITIZEN. Thou art rich, and thou hast much cool store of wine.
But the town thirsts, and every beat of our blood
Hastens us on to maniac agony.
The Assyrians have our wells, and half the tanks
Are dry, and the pools shoal with baking mud:
The water left to us is pestilent.
And therefore have we asked the governors
For death: and it is granted us.

ANOTHER. Five days
Hath Prince Ozias bidden us endure.

ANOTHER. For there are still fools among us who dare trust
God has not made a bargain of our lives.

ANOTHER. We are a small people, and our war is weak:
Who knows whether our God doth not desire
Armies and great plains full of spears and horses,
And cities made of bronze and hewn white stone
And scarlet awnings, throng'd with sworded men,
To shout his name up from the earth and kill
All crying at the gates of other heavens;
And hath grown tired of peaceable praise and folk
That in a warren of dry mountains dwell,
Whose few throats can make little noise in heaven.

A YOUNG MAN. For sure God's love hath wandered to strange nations;

His pleasure in the breasts of Jerusalem
Is a delight grown old. Yea, he would change
That shepherd-woman of the earthly cities,
Whose mind is as the clear light of her hills,
Full of the sound of a hundred waters falling;
And poureth his desire out, belike,
Upon that queen the wealth of the world hath clad,
Babylon, for whose golden bed the gods
Wrangle like young men with great gifts and boasts;
Whose mind is as a carbuncle of fire,
Full of the sound of amazing flames of music.

ANOTHER. Yea, what can Israel offer against her,
Whom the rich earth out of her mines hath shod,
And crowned with emeralds grown in secret rocks,
Who on her shoulders wears the gleam of the sea's
Purple and pearls, and the flax of Indian ground
Is linen on her limbs cool as moonlight,
And fells of golden beasts cover her throne;
Whose passion moves in her thought as in the air
Melody moves of flutes and silver horns:
What can Jerusalem the hill-city
Offer to keep God's love from Babylon?

JUDITH. What but the beauty of holiness, and sound
Of music made by hearts adoring God?
You that speak lewdly of God, you yet shall see
Jerusalem treading upon her foes.
But what was that of five days one of you spoke?

A CITIZEN. Ozias sware an oath: hast thou not heard?

JUDITH. No, for I keep my mind away from your tongues
Wisely. Who walks in wind-blown dust of streets,
That hath a garden where the roses breathe?

A CITIZEN. I have no garden where the roses breathe;
I have a city full of women crying
And babies starving and men weak with thirst
Who fight each other for a dole of water.

ANOTHER. Not only thou hast pleasant garden-hours,
Judith, here in Bethulia; the Lord Death

Has bought the city for his garden-close,
And saunters in it watching the souls bloom
Out of their buds of flesh, and with delight
Smelling their agony.

ANOTHER. But in five days
Either our God will turn his mind to us,
Or, if he careth not for us nor his honour,
Ozias will let open the main gate
And let the Assyrians end our dreadful lives.

JUDITH. O I belong to a nation utterly lost!
God! thou hast no tribe on the earth; thy folk
Are helpless in the living places like
The ghosts that grieve in the winds under the earth.
Remember now thy glory among the living,
And let the beauty of thy renown endure
In a firm people knitted like the stone
Of hills, no mischief harms of frost or fire;
But now dust in a gale of fear they are.
They have blasphemed thee; but forgive them, God;
And let my life inhabit to its end
The spirit of a people built to God.—
So you have given God five days to come
And help you? You would make your souls as wares
Merchants hold up to bidders, and say, 'God,
Pay us our price of comfort, or we sell
To death for the same coin'? Five days God hath
To find the cost of Jewry, or death buys you?

A CITIZEN. Here comes Ozias: ask him.

JUDITH. Hold him there.

[*Judith comes down into the street.*

OZIAS. Judith, I came to speak with thee.

JUDITH. And I
Would speak with thee. What tale is this they tell
That thou hast sworn to give this people death?

OZIAS. In five days those among us who still live
Will have no souls but the fierce anguish of thirst.
If God ere then relieves us, well. If not,

We give ourselves away from God to death.
JUDITH. Darest thou do this wickedness, and set
Conditions to the mercy of our God?
OZIAS. Death hath a mercy equal unto God's.—
Look at the air above thee; is there sign
Of mercy in that naked splendour of fire?
Too Godlike! We are his: he covers us
With golden flame of air and firmament
Of white-hot gold, marvellous to see.
But whom, what heathen land hated of God,
Do his grey clouds shadow with comfort of rain?
Over our chosen heads his glory glows:
And in five days the torment in his city
Will be beyond imagining. We will go
Through swords into the quiet and cloud of death.
JUDITH. Ozias, wilt thou be an infamy?
Bethulia fallen, all Judea lies
Open to the feet and hoofs of Assyria.
OZIAS. Yea, and what doth Judea but cower down
Behind us? There 's no rescue comes from there.
We are alone with Holofernes' power.
JUDITH. But if we hold him off, will he not grant
The meed of a brave fight, captivity?—
Or we may treat with him, make terms for yielding.
OZIAS. We know his mind: he hath written it plain
In the torn flesh of our ambassadors.
His mind to us is death; we can but choose
Between sharp swords and the slow slaying of thirst.
JUDITH. He may torment us if we yield.
OZIAS. He may.
But not to yield is grisly and sure torment.
JUDITH. There must be hope, if we could reckon right!
OZIAS. Well, thou and God have five days more to build
A bridge of hope over our broken world.
And, for the town even now fearfully aches
In scalding thirst, not five days had I granted,
Had it not been for somewhat I must say

Secretly to thee.

JUDITH. Secretly? Then here;
Send off these men to labour at their groans
Elsewhere; for not within my house thou comest;
I'll have no thoughts against God in my house.
[*Ozias disperses the citizens.*

OZIAS. Judith, we are two upright minds in this
Herd of grovelling cowardice. We should,
To spiritual vision which can see
Stature of spirit, seem to stand in our folk
Like two unaltered stanchions in the heap
Of a house pulled down by fire. I know thy soul
Tempered by trust in God against this ruin;
But not in God, but in mortality
Thy soul stands founded; and death even now
Is digging at thy station in the world;
And as a man with ropes and windlasses
Pulls for new building columns of wreckt halls
Down with a breaking fall, so death has rigged
His skill about us, so he will break us down,
Ruin our height and courage; and as stone,
Carved with the beautiful pride of kings, hath made,
Hammer'd to rubble and ground for mortar, walls
Of farms and byres, our kill'd and broken natures,
With all their beauty of passion, yea, and delight
In God, death will shape and grind up to new
Housing for souls not royal as we are,
New flesh and mind for mean souls and dull hearts:
For death is only life destroying life
To roof the coming swarms in mortal shelter
Of flesh and mind experienced in joy.

JUDITH. Thy specious prologue means no good, I trow.
Thou wert to tell me wherefore for five days
We may pretend to be God's people still;
Why thou didst not make us over to death
Soon as the folk began to wail despair.

OZIAS. This reasoning will tell thee why.—No need,

I think, to bring up into speech the years
Since in the barley-field Manasses lay
Shot by the sun. I tried (nor failed, I think)
To hold thy soul up from its hurt, and be
Somewhat of sight to thee, until thy long
Blind season of disaster should be changed.
Always I have found friendship in thine eyes;
And pleasant words, and silences more pleasant,
Have made us moments wherein all the world
Left our sequester'd minds; so that I dared
Often believe our friendliness might be
The brink of love.

JUDITH. Stop! for thou hast enough
Disgraced mine ears.

OZIAS. I pray thee hear me out.
The dream of loving thee and being loved
Hath been my life; yea, with it I have kept
My heart drugg'd in a long delicious night
Colour'd with candles of imagined sense,
And musical with dreamt desire. I said,
The day will surely come upon the world,
To scatter this sweet night of fantasy
With morning, pour'd on my dream-feasted heart
Out of thine eyes, Judith. And yet I still
Feared for my dream, even as a maiden fears
The body of her lover. But, in the midst
Of all this charm'd delaying,—behold Death
Leapt into our world, lording it, standing huge
In front of the future, looking at us!
Thou seest now why, when the people came
Crying wildly to be given up to death,
I bade them wait five days?—That I at last
Might stamp the image of my glorious dream
Upon the world, even though it be wax
And the fires are kindling that must melt it out.
Judith, thou hast now five days more to live
This life of beautiful passion and sweet sense:

And now my love comes to thee like an angel
To call thee out of thy visionary love
For lost Manasses, out of ghostly desire
And shadows of dreams housing thy soul, that are
Vainer than mine were, dreams of dear things which death
Hath for ever broken; and lead thy life
To a brief shadowless place, into an hour
Made splendid to affront the coming night
By passion over sense more grandly burning
Than purple lightning over golden corn,
When all the distance of the night resounds
With the approach of wind and terrible rain,
That march to torment it down to the ground.
Judith, shall we not thus together make
Death admirable, yea, and triumph through
The gates of anguish with a prouder song
Than ever lifted a king's heart, who rode
Back from his war, with nations whipt before him,
Into trumpeting Nineveh?

JUDITH. Thou fool,
Death is nothing to me, and life is all.
But what foul wrong have I done to thee, Ozias,
That thou shouldst go about to put such wrong
Into my life as these defiling words?

OZIAS. Is it defilement to hear love spoken?

JUDITH. Yes! thou hast soiled me: to know my beauty,
Wherewith I loved Manasses, and still love,
Has all these years dwelt in thy heart a dream
Of favourite lust,—O this is foul in my mind.

OZIAS. I meant not what thou callest lust, but love.

JUDITH. What matters that? Thou hast desired me.
And knowing that, I feel my beauty clutch
About my soul with a more wicked shame
Than if I lived corrupt with leprosy.

OZIAS. Wilt thou still let the dead have claim on thee?
Judith, wilt thou be married to a grave?

JUDITH. I am married to my love; and it is vile,

Yea, it is burning in me like a sin,
That when my love was absent, thy desire
Should trespass where my love is single lord.

OZIAS. This is but superstition. Love belongs
To living souls. It is a light that kills
Shadows and ghosts haunting about the mind.
Yea, even now when death glooms so immense
Over the heaven of our being, Love
Would keep us white with day amid the dark
Down-coming of the storm, till the end took us.
And joy is never wasted. If we love,
Then although death shall break and bray our flesh,
The joy of love that thrilled in it shall fly
Past his destruction, subtle as fragrance, strong
And uncontrollable as fire, to dwell
In the careering onward of man's life,
Increasing it with passion and with sweetness.
Duty is on us therefore that we love
And be loved. Wert thou made to set alight
Such splendour of desire in man, and yet,
For a grave's sake, keep all thy beauty null,
And nothing be of good nor help to thy kind?

JUDITH. Help? What help in me?

OZIAS. To let go forth
The joy whereof thy beauty is the sign
Into the mind of man, and be therein
Courage of golden music and loud light
Against his enemies, the eternal dark
And silence.

JUDITH. Ah, not thus. Yet—could I not help?—
Why talk we? What thing should I say to thee
To pierce the pride of lust wrapping thy heart?
How show thee that, as in maidens unloved
There is virginity to make their sex
Shrink like a wound from eyes of love untimely,
So in a woman who hath learnt herself
By her own beauty sacred in the clasp

Of him whom her desire hath sacred made,
There is a fiercer and more virgin wrath
Against all eyes that come desiring her?

[*A Psalm of many voices strikes their ears, and through the street pass old men chanting, followed and answered by a troop of young men.*

Chorus: OLD MEN

Wilt thou not examine our hearts, O Lord God of our strength?
Wilt thou still be blindly trying us? Wilt thou not at length
Believe the crying of our words, that never our knees have bent
To foreign gods, nor any Jewish mouth or brain hath sent
Prayers to beseech the favour of abominable thrones
Worshipt by the heathen men with furnaces, wounds, and groans?

YOUNG MEN

And what good in our lives, strength or delighted glee,
Hath God paid to purchase our purity?
Though lust starve in our flesh, still he devises fire
To prove our lives pure as his fierce desire.
With huge heathenish tribes roaring exultant here,
Jewry fights as maid with a ravisher:
Tribes who better than we deal with the gods their lords,
For they pleasantly sin, yet the gods sharpen and drive their swords.

OLD MEN

Hast thou not tried us enough, Jehovah? Hast thou found any fire
Will draw from our hearts a smoke of burn'd idolatrous desire?
There is none in us, Lord: no other God in us but thee;
Only thy fires make our clean souls glitter with agony.
Pure we are, pure in our prayers, pure our souls look to thee, Lord;
And to be shewn to the world devoured by evil is our reward.

YOUNG MEN

We whose hearts were alone giving our God renown,
Under the wheels of hell we are fallen down!
False the heaven we built, fashion'd of purity;
'Tis heathen heavens, made out of sin, stand high.
Come, make much of our God! Comfort his ears with song,
Lest his pride the gods with their laughter wrong,
Seeing, huddled as beasts held by a fearful night
Full of lions and hunger, his folk crouch to the heathen might.

OLD MEN

Jehovah, still we refrain from crying to the infamous gates
That open easily into the heavens thy mind of jealousy hates.
Power is in them: hast thou no power? Wilt thou not beware
Lest thy mood now press our minds to venturous despair?

YOUNG MEN

Fool'd, fool'd, fool'd are our lives, held by the world in jeer;
With crazed eyes we behold veils of enormous fear
Hiding dreadfully those marvellous gates and stairs
Where the heathen delighted with sin throng with their prosperous prayers.

OLD MEN

Yea, hung like the front of pestilent winds, thunderous dark before
The way into the heathen heavens, terrible curtains pour,
Webs of black imagination and woven frenzy of sin;
And yet we know power on earth belongs to those within.

YOUNG MEN

Yea, through Jehovah's jealousy,
Burning dimly at last we see
The great brass made like rigid flame,
The gates of the heavens we dare not name.
Take hold of wickedness! Yea, have heart
To tear the darkness of sin apart;
And find, beyond, our comforted sight
Flash full of a glee of fiery light,—
The gods the heathen know through sin,
The gods who give them the world to win!

JUDITH. This may I not escape. My world hath need
Of me who still hold God firm in my mind.
It is no matter if I fail: I must
Send the God in me forth, and yield to him
The shaping of whatever chance befall.—
Ozias! hateful thou hast made thyself
To me; for thou hast hatefully soiled my beauty,
My preciousest, given me to attire my soul
For her long marriage festival of life.
Yet I must make request to thee, and thou
Must grant it. When the sun is down to-night,
Quietly set the main gate open: I
Will pass therethrough and treat with Holofernes.

OZIAS. What, wilt thou go to be murdered by these fiends?

JUDITH. Ask nothing, but do simply my request.

OZIAS. I will: so thou shalt know the reverent heart
I have for thee, although its worship thou
So bitterly despisest; but thy will
Shall be a sacred thing for me to serve.
Thou hast thy dangerous demand, because
It is thou who askest, it is I who may
Grant it to thee,—this only! Yea, I will send
Thy heedless body among risks that thou,
Looking alone at the great shining God
Within thy mind, seest not; but I see
And sicken at them. Yet do I not require
Thy purpose; whether thy proud heart must have
The wound of death from steel that has not toucht
The peevish misery these Jews call blood;
Whether thy mind is for velvet slavery
In the desires of some Assyrian lord——
Forgive me, Judith! there my love spoke, made
Foolish with injury; and I should be
Unwise to stay here, lest it break the hold
I have it in. I go, and I am humbled.
But thou shalt have thy asking: the gate is thine.

[*He goes.*

JUDITH. How can it harm me more, to feel my beauty
Read by man's eyes to mean his lust set forth?
Yea, Holofernes now can bring no shame
Upon me that Ozias hath not brought.
But this is chief: what balance can there be
In my own hurt against a nation's pining?
God hath given me beauty, and I may
Snare with it him whose trap now bites my folk.
There is naught else to think of. Let me go
And set those robes in order which best pleased
Manasses' living eyes; and let me fill
My gown with jewels, such as kindle sight,
And have some stinging sweetness in my hair.—
Manasses, my Manasses, lost to me,
Gone where my love can nothing search, and hidden
Behind the vapours of these worldly years,
The many years between me and thy death;
Thine ears are sealed with immortal blessedness
Against our miserable din of living;
Through thy pure sense goeth no soil of grief.
Forgive me! for thou hast left me here to be hurt
And moved to pity by the dolour of men.
The garment of my soul is splasht with sorrow,
Sorrowful noise and sight; and like to fires
Of venom spat on me, the sorrow eats
Through the thin robe of sense into my soul.
And it is cried against me, this keen anguish,
By my own people and my God's;—and thou
Didst love them. Therefore thou must needs forgive me,
That I devise how this my beauty, this
Sacred to thy long-dead joy of desire,
May turn to weapon in the hand of God;
Such weapon as he hath taken aforetime
To sword whole nations at a stroke to their knees,—
Storms of the air and hilted fire from heaven,
And sightless edge of pestilence hugely swung
Down on the bulk of armies in the night.

Such weapon in God's hand, and wielded so,
A woman's beauty may be now, I pray;
A pestilence suddenly in this foreign blood,
A blight on the vast growth of Assyrian weed,
A knife to the stem of its main root, the heart
Of Holofernes. God! Let me hew him down,
And out of the ground of Israel wither our plague!

II

Before the Tent of Holofernes.

HOLOFERNES. Night and her admirable stars again!
And I again envying her and questioning!
What hast thou, Night, achieved, denied to me,
That maketh thee so full of quiet stars?
What beauty has been mingled into thee
So that thy depth burns with the peace of stars?—
I now with fires of uproarious heat,
Exclaiming yellow flames and towering splendour
And huge fragrant smoke of precious woods,
Must build against thy overlooking, Stars,
And against thy terrible eternal news
Of Beauty that burns quietly and pure,
A lodge of wild extravagant earthly fire;
Even as under passions of fleshly pleasure
I hide myself from my desiring soul.

[*Enter Guards with Judith.*

GUARD 1. We found this woman wandering in the trenches,
And calling out, 'Take me to Holofernes,
Assyrians, I am come for Holofernes.'

GUARD 2. She would not, for no words of ours, unveil,
And something held us back from handling her.

GUARD 1. We think she must be beautiful, although
She is so stubborn with that veil of hers.

GUARD 2. We minded my lord's word, that he be shewn
All the seized women which are strangely fair.

HOLOFERNES. Take off thy veil.

JUDITH. I will not.
HOLOFERNES. Take thy veil
From off thy face, Jewess, or thou straight goest
To entertain my soldiers.
JUDITH. I will not.
HOLOFERNES. Am I to tear it, then?
JUDITH. My lord, thou durst not.
HOLOFERNES. Ha, there is spirit here. I have the whim,
Jewess, almost to believe thee: I dare not!
But tell me who thou art.
JUDITH. That shalt thou know
Before the night has end.
HOLOFERNES. Take off thy veil.
JUDITH. Alone for Holofernes am I come.
HOLOFERNES. And there is only Holofernes here.
These fellows are but thoughts of mine; my whole
Army, that treads down all the earth and breaks
The banks of fending rivers into marsh,
Is nought but my forth-going imagination.
Where I am, there is no man else: if I
Appeared before thee in a throng of spears,
I'ld stand alone before thee, girt about
By powers of my mind made visible.
JUDITH. For captured peasants or for captured kings
Such words would have the right big sound. But I
Am woman, and I hear them not: I say
I will not, before any man but thee,
Make known my face; I am only for thee.
When I have thee alone and in thy tent
I will unveil.
HOLOFERNES [*to the Guards*].
What! Staring?—Hence, you dogs!

III

In the Tent of Holofernes

HOLOFERNES [*alone with Judith*].

Thou art the woman! Thou hast come to me!—
O not as I thought! not with senses blazing
Far into my deep soul abiding calm
Within their glory of knowledge, as the vast
Of night behind her outward sense of stars.
Now am I but the place thy beauty brightens,
And of myself I have no light of sense
Nor certainty of being: I am made
Empty of all my wont of life before thee,
A vessel where thy splendour may be poured,
After the way the great vessel of air
Accepts the morning power of the sun.
Now nothing I have known of me remains,
Save that within me, far as the world is high
Beneath this dawn that gilds my spirit's air,
Some depth, more inward even than my soul,
Troubles and flashes like the shining sea.
O Jewish woman, if thou knewest all
The hunger and the tears the punisht world
Suffers by cause of thee, and of my dream
That thou wert somewhere hidden in mankind!
I could not but obey my dream, and toil
To break the nations and to sift them fine,
Pounding them with my warfare into dust,
And searching with my many iron hands
Through their destruction as through crumbs of marl,
Until my palms should know the jewel-stone
Betwixt them, the Woman who is Beauty,—
Nature so long hath like a miser kept
Buried away from me in this heap of Jews!
Now that we twain might meet, women and men
In every land where I have felt for thee

Have taken desolation for their home,
Crying against me,—and against thee unknowing.
Ah, but I had given over to despair
The mind in me. I ground the stubborn tribes,
I quarried them like rocks and broke them small
And ground them down to flinders and to sands;
But never gleamed the jewel-stone therein,
Naught but the common flint of earth I found.
And in a dreary anger I kept on
Assailing the whole kind of man, because
Some manner of war my soul must needs inhabit.
Like a man making himself in drunken sleep
A king, my soul, drunk with its earthly war,
Kept idle all its terrible want of thee,
Believed itself managing arms with God;
Yea, when my trampling hurry through the earth
Made cloudy wind of the light human dust,
I thought myself to move in the dark danger
Of blinding God's own face with blasts of war!
Until my rage forgot his crime against me,
His hiding thee, the beauty I had dreamt.
Yea, and I filled my flesh with furious pleasure,
That in the noise of it my soul should hear
No whispering thought of desperate desire.
Nevertheless, I knew well that my heart's
Sightless imagination lifted his face
Continually awake for news of thee.
But 'twas infirm and crazy waking, like
As when a starving sentry, put to guard
The sleep of a broken soldiery that flees
Through winter of wild hills from hounding foes,
Hath but the pain of frozen wounds, and fear
Feeding on his dark spirit, to watch withal.
And lo,
As suddenly, as blessedly thou comest
Now to my heart's unseeing watch for thee,
As out of the night behind him into the heart,

Drugg'd senseless with its ache, of that lost soldier,
An arrow leaps, and ere the stab can hurt,
His frozen waking is the ease of death.
So I am killed by thee; all the loud pain
Of pleasure that had lockt my heart in life,
Wherein with blinded and unhearing face
My hope of thee yet stood and strained to look
And listen for thy coming,—all this life
Is killed before thee; yea, like marvellous death,
Spiritual sense invests my heart's desire;
And round the quiet and content thereof,
The striving hunger of my fleshly sense
Fails like a web of hanging cloth in fire.—
Tell me now, if thou knowest, why thou hast come!

JUDITH. Sufficeth not for us that I have come?—
Let not unseemly things live in my mouth;
Yet I would praise thee as thou praisest me,
But in a manner that my people use,
Things to approach in song they list not speak.
And song, thou knowest, inwrought with chiming strings,
Sweetens with sweet delay loving desire:
Also thine eyes will feed, and thy heart wonder.—

Balkis was in her marble town,
And shadow over the world came down.
Whiteness of walls, towers and piers,
That all day dazzled eyes to tears,
Turned from being white-golden flame,
And like the deep-sea blue became.
Balkis in her garden went;
Her spirit was in discontent
Like a torch in restless air.
Joylessly she wandered there,
And saw her city's azure white
Lying under the great night,
Beautiful as the memory
Of a worshipping world would be
In the mind of a god, in the hour

When he must kill his outward power;
And, coming to a pool where trees
Grew in double greeneries,
Saw herself, as she went by
The water, walking beautifully,
And saw the stars shine in the glance
Of her eyes, and her own fair countenance
Passing, pale and wonderful,
Across the night that filled the pool.
And cruel was the grief that played
With the queen's spirit; and she said:
'What do I here, reigning alone?
For to be unloved is to be alone.
There is no man in all my land
Dare my longing understand;
The whole folk like a peasant bows
Lest its look should meet my brows
And be harmed by this beauty of mine.
I burn their brains as I were sign
Of God's beautiful anger sent
To master them with punishmen
Of beauty that must pour distress
On hearts grown dark with ugliness.
But it is I am the punisht one.
Is there no man, is there none,
In whom my beauty will but move
The lust of a delighted love;
In whom some spirit of God so thrives
That we may wed our lonely lives?
Is there no man, is there none?'—
She said, 'I will go to Solomon.'

HOLOFERNES. I shall not bear it: dreamed, it hath made my life
Fail almost, like a storm broken in heaven
By its internal fire; and now I feel
Love like a dreadful god coming to do
His pleasure on me, to tear me with his joy
And shred my flesh-wove strength with merciless

Utterance through me of inhuman bliss.—
I must have more divinity within me.—
Come to me, slave! [*Calling out to his attendants.*
JUDITH. Thou callest someone? Alas!
O, where 's my veil?—Cry him to stay awhile!—
HOLOFERNES. Thou troubled with such whimsy!—But 'tis no one,
A mere sexless thing of mine.
JUDITH. He is coming!
I threw my veil—where?—I must bow my face
Close to the ground, or his eyes will find me out;
And—O my lord, hold him back with thy voice!
[*She has knelt down.*
Hold him in doubt to enter a moment, while
I loosen my hair into some manner of safety
Against his prying.
HOLOFERNES. Slave, dost thou hear me? Come!—
I marvel, room for such a paltering mood
Should be within thy mind, now so nearly
Deified with the first sense of my love. [*A Eunuch comes in.*
HOLOFERNES. Wine! The mightiest wine my sutlers have;
Wine with the sun's own grandeur in it, and all
The wildness of the earth conceiving Spring
From the sun's golden lust: wine for us twain!
And when thou hast brought it, burn anear my bed
Storax and cassia; and let wealth be found
To cover my bed with such strife of colour,
Crimson and tawny and purple-inspired gold,
That eyes beholding it may take therefrom
Splendid imagination of the strife
Of love with love's implacable desire.
JUDITH [*still kneeling*]. I must lean on thee now, my God! A weight
Of pitiable weakness thou must bear
And move as it were thine own strength; tell my heart
How not to sicken in abomination,
Show me the way to loathe this vile man's rage,

Now close to seize me into the use of his pleasure,
With the loathing that is terrible delight.
So that not fainting, but refresht and astonisht
And strangely spirited and divinely angry
My body may arise out of its passion,
Out of being enjoyed by this fiend's flesh.
Then man my arm; then let mine own revenge
Utter thy vengeance, Lord, as speech doth meaning;
Yea, with hate empower me to say bravely
The glittering word that even now thy mind
Purposes, God,—the swift stroke of a falchion!

HOLOFERNES. Woman, beloved, why art thou fixt so long
Kneeling and downward crookt, and in thy hair
Darkened?—Ah, thy shoulders urging shape
Of loveliness into thy hair's pouring gleam!

JUDITH. Needs must I pray my Jewish God for help
Against my bridal joys. For I do fear them.

HOLOFERNES. I also: these are the joys that fear doth own.

IV

At the Gate of Bethulia. On the walls, on either side of the Gate, are citizens watching the Assyrian camp; Ozias also, standing by himself.

OZIAS. When wilt thou cure thyself, spirit of the earth,
When wilt thou cure thyself of thy long fever,
That so insanely doth ferment in thee?—
'Tis not man only: the whole blood of life
Is fever'd with desire. But as the brain,
Being lord of the body, is served by blood
So well that a hidden canker in the flesh
May send, continuous as a usury,
Its breeding venom upward, till in the brain
It vapour into enormity of dreaming:
So man is lord of life upon the earth;
And like a hastening blood his nature wells
Up out of the beasts below him, they the flesh

And he the brain, they serving him with blood;
And blood so loaden with brute lust of being
It steams the conscious leisure of man's thought
With an immense phantasma of desire,
An unsubduable dream of unknown pleasure;
Which he sends hungering forth into the world,
But never satisfied returns to him.
Who hath found beauty? Who hath not desired it?
'Tis but the feverish spirit of earthly life
Working deliriously in man, a dream
Questing the world that throngs upon man's mind
To find therein an image of herself;
And there is nothing answers her entreaty.—
I climb towards death: it is not falling down
For me to die, but up the event of the world
As up a mighty ridge I climb, and look
With lifted vision backward down on life.
So high towards death I am gone, listless I gaze
Where on the earth beneath me, into the fires
Of that Assyrian strength, our siege of fate,
Judith, the dream of my desire of beauty,
Goes daring forth, to shape herself therein,
Seeking to fashion in its turbulence
Some deed that will be likeness of herself.
For now I know her purpose: and I know
She will be murdered there. Against the world
The beauty I have lived in, my loved dream,
Goes, wild to master the world; and she will
Therefore be murdered. It is nothing now;
Wind from the heights of death is on my brow.

Talk among the other watchers

It must be, God is for us. Such a mind
As this of Judith's could not be, unless
God had spoken it unto her. She is
His special voice, to tell the Assyrians
Terrible matters.

Is she God's? I think
'Tis Holofernes hath her now.

If not,
Upon his soldiers he hath lavisht her.

Not he. Now they have known her, his filled senses
Never will leave go our wonderful Judith.

Ay, wonderful in Jewry. But there are
In Babylon women so beautiful,
They make men's spirits desperate, to know
Flesh cannot ever minister enough
Delight to ease the craving they are taskt with.

Who talks of Babylon when God even now
Is training her fierce champion, Holofernes,
Into the death a woman holds before him?

A woman killing Holofernes!

Ay;
Be she abused by him or not, I know
God means to give her marvellous hands to-night.
I know it by my heart so strangely sick
With looking out for the first drowsy stir
In that huge flaming quiet of the camp.
Now fearfuller qualm than famine eagerly
Handles my life and pulls at it,—my faith's
Hunger for being fed with sounds and visions:
The firelight mixt with a trooping bustle of shadows,
The silence suddenly shouting with surprise,
That tells of men astounded out of sleep
To find that God hath dreadfully been among them.

We have mistaken Judith.

Even as now
God is mistaken by your doubting hearts.

She that has dealt with such a pride of spirit
In all her ways of life, so that she seemed
To feel like shadow, falling on the light
Her own mind made, the common thoughts of men;
Ay, she that to-day came down into our woe
And stood among the griefs that buzz upon us,
Like one who is forced aside from a bright journey
To stoop in a small-room'd cottage, where loud flies
Pester the inmates and the windows darken;
This she, this Judith, out of her quiet pride,
And out of her guarded purity, to walk
Where God himself from violent whoredom could
Scarcely preserve her shuddering flesh! and all
For our sake, for the lives she hath in scorn,
This horrible Assyrian risk she ventures.

There should be prayer for that. Let us ask God
To bind the men, whose greed now glares upon her,
In some strange feebleness; surely he will;
Surely not with woman's worst injury
Her noble obedience he will reward!
Let us ask God to bind these men before her.

They are not his to bind: else, were they here?
They are the glorying of Nebuchadnezzar's
Heart of fury against our God, sent here
Like insolent shouting into his holy quiet.
God could not bind these bragging noises up
In Nebuchadnezzar's heart; it is not his,
But made by Babylonian gods or owned
By thrones that hold the heavens over Nineveh.
For all these outland greatnesses, these kings
Whose war goes pealing through the world, these towns
Infidel and triumphant, reaching forth
Armies to hug the world close to their lust,—
What are they but the gods making a scorn
Of our God on the earth? Then how can he

Alter these men from wicked delight? or how
Keep Judith all untoucht among their hands,
When his own quietness he could not keep
Unbroken by the gods' Assyrian insult?

But with a thunder he can shatter this
Intruding noise, and make his quiet again.

And in their lust he can entangle them,
Deceiving them far into Judith's beauty,
Which is his power, and lop them from their gods.

Their outrage will be ornament upon her!

Out of the hands of the goblins she will come
Not markt with shame, but wearing their vile usage
Like one whom earthly reign covers with splendour.

The ignominy they thought of shall be turned
To shining, yea, to announcing through the world
How God hath used her to beguile the heathen.

It begins! Now it begins! Lo, how dismay
Is fallen on the camp in a strange wind:
The ground, that seemed as spread with yellow embers,
Leaps into blazing, and like cinders whirled
And scattered up among the flames, are black
Bands of frantic men flickering about!

Ozias! seest thou how our enemies
Are labouring in amazement? How they run
Flinging fuel to light them against fear?

Now they begin to roar their terror: now
They wave and beckon wordless desperate things
One to another.

Hear the iron and brass
Ringing above their voices, as they snatch
The arms that seem to fight among themselves,

Seized by their masters' anguish; dost thou hear
The clumsy terror in the camp, the men
Hasting to arm themselves against our God,
Ozias?

OZIAS. Lions have taken a sentinel.

A CITIZEN. Judith hath taken Holofernes.

Judith's voice outside, under the gate.

Yea,
And brought him back with her. Open the gates.

THE CITIZENS. Open the gates. Bring torches. Wake, ye Jews!
Hail, Judith, marvellously chosen woman!
How bringst thou Holofernes? Show him to us.

JUDITH. Dare you indeed behold him?

A CITIZEN. Is he bound?

JUDITH. Drugged rather, with a medicine that God
Prepared for him and gave into my hands.
Open the gates! It is a harmless thing,
The Holofernes I have made your show;
You may gaze blithely upon him. I have tamed
The man's pernicious brain. Open the gates!
What, are your hands still nerveless? But my hands,
The hands of a woman, have done notable work.

The Gates open. Judith appears, standing against the night and the Assyrian fires. Torches and shouting in the town.

CITIZENS. Judith! Judith alone! Where is thy boast
Of Holofernes captured?

JUDITH. I am alone,
Indeed; and you are many; yet with me
Comes Holofernes, certainly a captive.

OZIAS. What trifle is this?

JUDITH. Trifle? It is the word.
A trifle, a thing of mere weight, I have brought you
From the Assyrian camp. My apron here
Is loaded now more heavily, but as meanly
As an old witch's skirt, when she comes home
From seeking camel's-dung for kindling; yet
My burden was, an hour ago, the world

Where you were ground to tortures; it was the brain
Inventing your destruction.—Look you now!
[*Holding up the head of Holofernes.*
This is the mouth through which commandment came
Of massacre and damnation to the Jews;
Here was the mind the gods that hate our God
Used to empower the agonies they devised
Against us; here your dangers were all made,
Your horrible starvation; and the thirst
Those wicked gods supposed would murder you,
Here a creature became, a ravenous creature;
Yea, here those mighty vigours lived which took,
Like ocean water taking frost, the hate
Those gods have for Jehovah, shaping it
Atrociously into the war that clencht
Their fury about you, frozen into iron.
Jews, here is the head of Holofernes: take it
And let it grin upon our highest wall
Over against the camp of the Asyrians.
[*She throws them the head.*
Ay, you may worry it; now is the jackal's time;
Snarl on your enemy, now he is dead.

OZIAS. Judith, be not too scornful of their noise.
There are no words may turn this deed to song:
Praise cannot reach it. Only with such din,
Unmeasured yelling exultation, can
Astonishment speak of it. In me, just now,
Thought was the figure of a god, firm standing,
A dignity like carved Egyptian stone;
Thou like a blow of fire hast splinter'd it;
It is abroad like powder in a wind,
Or like heapt shingle in a furious tide,
Thou having roused the ungovernable waters
My mind is built amidst, a dangerous tower.
My spirit therein dwelling, so overwhelmed
In joy or fear, disturbance without name,
Out of the rivers it is fallen in

Can snatch no substance it may shape to words
Answerable to thy prowess and thy praise.
We are all abasht by thee, and only know
To worship thee with shouts and astounded passion.

JUDITH. Yes, now the world has got a voice against me:
At last now it may howl a triumph about me.

OZIAS. This, nevertheless, my thought can seize from out
The wildness that goes pouring past it. God,
Wondrously having moved thee to this deed,
Hath shown the Jews a wondrous favouring love.
Thee it becomes not, standing though thou art
On this high action, to think scorn of men
Whom God thinks worthy of having thee for saviour.

JUDITH. This is a subtle flattery. What know I
Of whom God loves, of whom God hates? I know
This only: in my home, in my soul's chamber,
A filthy verminous beast hath made his lair.
I let him in; I let this grim lust in;
Not only did not bolt my doors against
His forcing, but even put them wide and watcht
Him coming in, to make my house his stable.
What though I killed him afterward? All my place,
And all the air I live in, is foul with him.
I killed him? Truly, I am mixt with him;
Death must have me before it hath all him.

OZIAS. In thee, too, are the floods, the wild rivers
Of nameless mind, overrunning thy thought?
How else, indeed? Nay, we are dull with joy:
Of thee we thought not, out of the hands of outrage
Coming back, although with victory coming.
But this makes surety once more of my thought,
And gives again my reason its lost station;
For it may come now in my privilege
(A thing that could cure madness in my brain)
That thou from me persuasion hast to endure
What well I know thy soul, thy upright soul,
Feels as abominable harness on it

Fastening thee unwillingly to crime,—
The wickedness that hath delighted in thee.
JUDITH. Ay? Art thou there already? Tasting, art thou,
What the Assyrians may have forced on me,
Ere thou hast well swallowed thy new freedom?
Indeed, I know this is the wine of the feast
Which I have set for thee and thy Bethulia;
And 'tis the wine makes delicate the banquet.
OZIAS. Wait: listen to me. 'Tis I now must be wise
And thou the hearkener. Not without wound
(So I make out, at least, thy hurrying words)
Comest thou back to us from conquering.
And such a wound, I easily believe,
As eats into thy soul and rages there;
Yea, I that know thee, Judith, know thy soul
Worse rankling hath in it from heathen insult
Than flesh could take from steel bathed in a venom
Art magic brewed over a charcoal fire,
Blown into flame by hissing of whipt lizards.
Yet is it likely, by too much regarding,
Thy hurt is pamper'd in its poisonous sting.
Wounds in the spirit need no surgery
But a mind strong not to insist on them.
See, then, thou hast not too much horror of this;
Who that fights well in battle comes home sound?—
Much less couldst thou, who must, with seeming weakness,
Invite the power of Holofernes forth
Ere striking it, thy womanhood the ambush.
For thou didst plan, I guess, to duel him
In snares, weaving his greed about his limbs,
Drawn out and twisted winding round his strength
By ministry of thy enticing beauty;
That when he thought himself spending on thee
Malicious violence, and thou hadst made him
Languish, stupid with boasting and delight,
Thy hands might find him a tied quiet victim
Under their anger, maiming him of life.

Now, thy device accomplisht, wilt thou grudge
Its means? Wilt thou scruple to understand
Thy abus'd sex will show upon thy fame
A nobler colour of glory than a soldier's
Wounded bravery rusting his habergeon?
Nay, will not the world rejoice, thou being found
Among its women, ready such insolence
To bear as is unbearable to think on,
Thereby to serve and save God and his people?

JUDITH. The world rejoice over me? Yea, I am certain.

OZIAS. Then art thou too fastidious. It is weak
To make thyself a shame of being injured;
And is it injury indeed? Nay, is it
Anything but a mere opinion hurt?
Not thou, but customary thought is here
Molested and annoyed; the only nerve
Can carry anguish from this to thy soul,
Is that credulity which ties the mind
Firmly to notional creature as to real.
Advise thee, then; dark in thyself keep hid
This grief; and thou wilt shortly find it dying.

A CITIZEN. Judith,
Pardon our ecstasy. 'Tis time thou hadst
Our honour. But first tell us all the event,
That in thy proper height thou with thy deed
May stand against our worship.

JUDITH. Why do you stop
Your shouts, and glare upon me? Have you need
Truly to hear my tale? I think, not so.
Ozias here, as he hath whiled at ease
Upon the walls my stay in the camp yonder,
Hath fairly fancied all that I have done,
And more exactly, and with a relishing gust,
All that was done to me. Ask him, therefore;
If he hath not already entertained
Your tedious leisure with my story told
Pat to your liking, enjoyed, and glosst with praise.—

And yet, why ask him? Why go even so far
To hear it? Ask but the clever libidinousness
Dwelling in each of your hearts, and it will surely
Imagine for you how I trained to my arms
Lewd Holofernes, and kept him plied with lust,
Until his wild blood in the end paused fainting,
And he lay twitching, drained of all his wits;—
But there was wine as well working in him,
Feebling his sinews; 'twas not all my doing,
The snoring fit that came before his death,
The routing beastly slumber that was my time.
You know it all! Why ask me for the tale?

OZIAS. Comfort her: praise her. She is strangely ashamed
Of Holofernes having evilly used her.

A CITIZEN. We will contrive the triumph of our joy
Into some tune of words, and bring thee on,
Accompanied by singing, to thy house.

JUDITH. I pray you, rather let me go alone.
You will do better to be searching out
All sharpen'd steel that may take weapon-use.
The Assyrians are afraid: it is your time.

[*They surround Judith and go with her.*

Chorus of Citizens praising Judith and leading her to her house.

Over us and past us go the years;
Like wind that taketh sound from jubilee
And aloud flieth ringing,
Over us goeth the speed of the years,
Like loud noise eternally bringing
The greatness women have done.
Deborah was great; with her singing
She hearten'd the men that the horses had dismayed;
Deborah, the wife of Lapidoth, alone
Stood singing where the men were horribly afraid,
Singing of God in the midst of fear;
When archers out of Hazor were
Eating the land like grasshoppers,

And darkness at noon was plundering the air
Of the light of the sun's insulted fires,
Red darkness covering Sisera's host
As Jewry was covered by the Canaanite's boast:
For the earth was broken into dust beneath
The force of his chariots' thundering tyres,
Nine hundred chariots of iron.
  Deborah was great in her prophesying;
But, though her anger moved through the Israelites,
And the loose tribes her indignant crying
Bound into song, fashion'd to an army;
And before the measure of her song went flying,
Like leaves and breakage of the woods
Fallen into pouring floods,
The iron and the men of Sisera and Jabin;
Not by her alone
God's punishment was done
On Canaan intending a monstrous crime,
On the foaming and poison of the serpent in Hazor;
Two women were the power of God that time.
  Yea, and sullenly down
Into its hiding town,
Even though the lightning were still in its heart,
The broken dragon, drawing in its fury,
Had croucht to mend its shatter'd malice,
Had lifted its head again and spat against God.
But God its endlessly devising brain,
Its braving spirit, its captain Sisera,
Into the hands of another woman brought:
In nets of her persuasion
She that wild spirit caught,
She fasten'd up that uncontrollable thought.
Sisera spake, and the crops were flames;
Sisera lookt, and blood ran down the door-sills.
But weary, trusting his entertainment,
He came to Jael, the Kenite woman;
A woman who gave him death for a bed,

And with base tools nailed down his murderous head
Fast to the earth his rage had fed
With men unreckonably slain.
  But than these wonderfully greater,
Judith, art thou;
The praise of both shall follow like a shadow
After thy glory now,
Who alone the measureless striding,
The high ungovern'd brow,
Of Assur upon the hills of the world
Hast tript and sent him hugely sliding,
Like a shot beast, down from his towering,
By his own lamed
Mightiness hurl'd
To lie a filth in disaster.
Deborah and Jael, famously named,
Like rich lands enriching the city their master,
Bring thee now their most golden honour.
For the beauty of thy limbs was found
By a dreadfuller enemy dreadful as the sound
Of Deborah's singing, though hers was a song
That had for its words thousands of men.
But thou thyself, looking upon them,
Didst weaken the Assyrians mortally.
They thought it terrible to see thee coming;
They falter'd in their impiousness,
Their hearts gave in to thee; they went
Backward before thee and shewed thee the tent
Where Holofernes would have thee in to him,
Yea, for his slayer waiting,
Waiting thee to entertain,
Desiring thee, his death, to enjoy, as Jael
Waited for Sisera her slain.

JUDITH. Have done! Do you think I know not why your souls
Are so delighted round me? Do you think
I see not what it is you praise?—not me,
But you yourselves triumphing in me and over me.

A CITIZEN. Did we kill Holofernes?
JUDITH. No: nor I.
That corpse was not his death. He is alive,
And will be till there is no more a world
Filled with his hidden hunger, waiting for souls
That ford the monstrous waters of the world.
Alive in you is Holofernes now,
But fed and rejoicing; I have filled your hunger.
Yea, and alive in me: my spirit hath been
Enjoyed by the lust of the world, and I am changed
Vilely by the vile thing that clutcht on me,
Like sulphurous smoke eating into silver.
Your song is all of this, this your rejoicing;
You have good right to circle me with song!
You are the world, and you have fed on me.
A CITIZEN. We are the world; yes, but the world for ever
Honouring thee.
JUDITH. How am I honoured so,
If I no honour have for the world, but rather
Hold it an odious and traitorous thing,
That means no honour but to those whose spirits
Have yielded to its ancient lechery?—
Defiled, defiled!
A CITIZEN. Thou wert moved by our grief:
Was that a vile thing?
JUDITH. That was the cunning world.
It moved me by your grief to give myself
Into the pleasure of its ravenous love.
A CITIZEN. Judith, if thy hot spirit beareth still
Indignant suffering of villainy,
Think, that thou hast no wrong from it. Such things
Are in themselves dead, and have only life
From what lives round them. And around thee glory
Lives and will force its splendour on the harm
Thy purity endured, making it shine
Like diamond in sunlight, as before
Unviolated it could not.

JUDITH. Ay, to you
I doubt not I seem admirable now,
Worthy of being sung in loudest praise;
But to myself how seem I?

A CITIZEN. Surely as one
Whose charity went down the stairs of hell,
And barter'd with the fiends thy sacredest
For our deliverance.

JUDITH. And that you praise!—
I was a virgin spirit. Whence I come
I know not, and I care not whither I go.
One fearful knowledge holds me: that I am
A spirit walking dangerously here.
For the world covets me. I am alone,
And made of something which the world has not,
Unless its substance can devour my spirit.
And it hath devoured me! In Holofernes
It seized me, fed on me; and then gibed on me,
With show of his death scoffing at my rage,—
His death!—He lay there, drunken, glutted with me,
And his bare falchion hung beside the bed,—
Look on it, and look on the blood I made
Go pouring thunder of pleasure through his brain!—
And like a mad thing hitting at the madness
Thronging upon it in a grinning rout,
I my defilement smote, that Holofernes.
But does a maniac kill the frenzy in him,
When with his fists he beats the clambering fiends
That swarm against his limbs? No more did I
Kill my defilement; it was fast within me;
And like a frenzy can go out of me
And dress its hideous motions in my world.
For when I come back here, behold the thing
I murdered in the camp leaps up and yells!
The carrion Holofernes, my defilement,
Dances a triumph round me, roars and rejoices,
Quickened to hundreds of exulting lives.

A CITIZEN. God help thee in this wildness! Are we then
As Holofernes to thee?
JUDITH. You are naught
But the defilement that is in me now,
Rejoicing to be lodged safely within me.
You are the lust I entertained, rejoicing
To wreak itself upon my purity.
The stratagems of my ravishment you are,
Rejoicing that the will you serve has dealt
Its power on me. O, I hate you not.
You and your crying grief should have blown past
My heart like wind shaking a fasten'd casement.
But I must have you in. Myself I loathe
For opening to you, and thereby opening
To the demon which had set you on to whine
Pitiably in the porches of my spirit.
You are but noise; but he is the lust of the world,
The infinite wrong the spirit, the virgin spirit,
Must fasten against, or be for ever vile.
A CITIZEN. But is it naught that we, the folk of God,
Are safe by thee?
JUDITH. God hath his own devices.
But I would be God's helper! I would be
Known as the woman whom his strength had chosen
To ruin the Assyrians!—O my God,
How dreadfully thou punishest small sins!
If it is thou who punishest; but rather
It is that, when we slacken in perceiving
The world's intent towards us, and fatally,
Enticed out of suspicion by fair signs,
Go from ignoring its proposals, down
To parley,—thou our weakness dost permit.
In all my days I from the greed of the world
Virginal have kept my spirit's dwelling,—
Till now; yea, all my being I have maintained
Sacredly my own possession; for love
But made more beautiful and more divine

My spirit's ownership. And yet no warning,
When I infatuate went down to be
Procuress of myself to the world's desire,
Did God blaze on my blindness, no rebuke.
Therefore I am no more my virgin own,
But hatefully, unspeakably, the world's.
To these now I belong; they took me and used me.
I have no pride to live for; and why else
Should one stay living, if not joyfully proud?
For I have yielded now; mercilessly
What is makes foolish nothing of what was.
To know the world, for all its grasping hands,
For all its heat to utter its pent nature
Into the souls that must go faring through it,
Availing nothing against purity,
Made always like rebellion trodden under,—
By this was life a noble labour. Now
I have been persuaded into the world's pleasure:
And now at last I will all certainly
Contrive for myself the death of Holofernes.

[*Ozias comes behind her and catches the lifted falchion.*

JUDITH. It was well done, Ozias.

OZIAS. I have watcht
Thy anguish growing, and I lookt for this.

JUDITH. Thou knowest me better than I know myself.
What moves in me is strange and uncontrolled,
That once I thought was ruled: thou knew'st me better.—
Indeed thou must forgive me; what was I
To take so bitterly thy suit? What right
Had I to give thee anger, when thou wouldst
Brighten thy hopeless death with me enjoyed,
I, even from that anger, going to be
Holofernes' pleasure?—Thou knewest me better,
And therefore shalt forgive me. Ay, no doubt
My spirit answered thee so fiercely then
Because it felt thee reading me aright,
How a mere bragging was my purity.

But now to pardon askt, I must add thanks.—
I had forgot Manasses! Even love
Was driven forth of me by these loud mouths!
Whether in death he waits for me, I know not;
But it had been an unforgivable thing
To have made this the end; not to have gone
To death as unto spousals, leaving life
As one sets down a work faithfully done,
And knows oneself by service justified,
Worthy of love, whether love be or not.
But, soiled with detestation, to have thrown
Fiercely aside the garment of this light;
Proved at the last impatient, death desiring
Like a mere doffing of foul drenchèd clothes;
Release from the wicked hindering mire of sorrow;
A comfortable darkness hiding me
Out of the glowing world myself have made
An insult, domineering me with splendour:—
O such a death had turned, past all forgiving,
My insult to Manasses, and searcht him out,
Even where he is quiet, with the blaze,
Ranging like din, of this contempt, this triumph.
Not crying out such hateful news should I
Flee hunted into death, unto my love.
From this, Ozias, thou hast saved me. Now
I am to learn my shame, that not amazed,
But practised in my burden, I at last,
When my time comes, may all in gladness fare
The road made sacred by Manasses' feet.

[*Judith goes into her house.*

OZIAS [*addressing the citizens*]. You do well to be stricken silent here.
Terrible Holofernes slain by a woman
Was something wonderful, to be noised aloud;
But this is a wonder past applauding thought,
This grief darkening Judith, in the midst
Of the new shining glory she herself

Has brought to conquer in our skies the storm.
You do well to be dumb: for you have seen
Virginity. That spirit you have seen,
Seen made wrathfully plain that secret spirit,
Whereby is man's frail scabbard filled with steel.
This, cumbered in the earthen kind of man,
Which ceaseless waters would be wearing down,
Alone giveth him stubborn substance, holds him
Upright and hard against impious fate.
All things within it would the world possess,
And have them in the tide of its desire:
Man hath his nature of the vehement world;
He is a torrent like the stars and beasts
Flowing to answer the fierce world's desire.
But like a giant wading in the sea
Stands in the rapture, and refusing it,
And looking upward out of it to find
Who knows what sign?—spirit, virginity;
A power caught by the power of the world;
The spirit in whose unknown hope doth man
Deny the mastery of his fortune here;
Virginity, whose pride, impassion'd only
To be as she herself would be, nor thence
To loosen for the world's endeavouring,
And, though all give the rash obedience, stand
Her own possession,—this virginity,
This pride of the spirit, asking no reward
But to be pride unthrown, this is the force
Whereby man hath his courage in the strange
Fearful turmoil of being conscious man.
Yea, worshipping this spirit, he will at last
Grow into high divine imagination,
Wherein the envious wildness of the world
Yieldeth its striving up to him, and takes
His mind, building the endless stars like stone
To house his towering joy of self-possessing.
This made you dumb; ignorant knowledge of this,

Blind vision of virginity's mightiness,
Did chide the exclamation in your hearts.
And think not you have seen, in Judith's grief,
Virginity drown'd in the pouring world.
For what is done is naught; what is, is all:
And Judith is virginity's appointed.
Even by her injury she showeth us,
As fire by violence may be revealed,
How sovereign is virginity.—
But let us now consult what way her grief,
Which is not to be understood by us,
May spend itself, with naught to urge its power.
Let us within our walls keep close this tale,
Close as the famine and the thirst were kept
Devouring us by the Assyrians.
Let there be no news going through the land
Out of Bethulia but this: that we
At Judith's hands had our deliverance,
But she from Holofernes and his crew
Unwilling and astonisht reverence,
As they were men with minds opprest by God.

THE ETERNAL WEDDING

HE. Even as a wind that hasteth round the world
From out cold hours fill'd with shadow of earth,
To pour alight against the risen sun;
So unto thee adoring, out of its shadow
Floweth my spirit, into the light of thee
Which Beauty is, and Joy. From my own fate,
From out the darkness wherein long I fared
Worshipping stars and morsels of the light,
Through doors of golden morning now I pass
Into the great whole light and perfect day
Of shining Beauty, open to me at last.
Yea, into thee now do I pass, beloved:
Beauty and thou are mine!

SHE. And I am thine!
I am desirable to my desire:
Thence am I clean as immortality
With Beauty and Joy, the fiery power of Beauty.

HE. And by my spirit made marvellous here by thee,
Poured out all clear into the gold of thee,
Not myself only do I know; I have
Golden within me the whole fate of man;
That every flesh and soul belongs to one
Continual joyward ravishment, whose end
Is here, in this perfection. Now I know—
For all my speculation soareth up,
A bird taking eternity for air,—
Now being mixt with thee, in the burning midst
Of Beauty for my sense and mind and soul,—
That life hath highest gone which hath most joy.
For like great wings forcefully smiting air
And driving it along in rushing rivers,
Desire of joy beats mightily pulsing forward
The world's one nature, and all the loose lives therein,

Carried and greatly streaming on a gale
Of craving, swept fiercely along in beauty;—
Like a great weather of wind and shining sun,
When the airs pick up whole huge waves of sea,
Crumble them in their grasp and high aloft
Sow them glittering, a white watery dust,
To company with light: so we are driven
Onward and upward in a wind of beauty,
Until man's race be wielded by its joy
Into some high incomparable day,
Where perfectly delight may know itself,—
No longer need a strife to know itself,
Only by its prevailing over pain.

SHE. Beloved, but no pain may strive with us.

HE. No, for we are flown far ahead of life:
The feet of our Spirit have wonderfully trod
The dangers of the rushing fate of life,
As summer-searching birds tread with their wings
Mountainous surges in the air. But many,
Not strongly fledge to ride the world's great rapture,
Must break, down fallen into steep confusion,
Where we climb easily and tower with joy.
Nevertheless doth life foretell in us
How it shall all make seizure at the last
Upon this height of ecstasy, this fort
Life like an army storms: Captains we are
In the great assault; and where we stand alone
Within these hours, built like establisht flames
Round us, at long last all man's life shall stand
At peace with joy, wearing delighted sense
As meadows wear their golden pleasure of flowers.
Certain my heart dwells in these builded hours,
That there is no more beauty beyond thee.
Thou art my utter beauty; and—behold
The marvel, God in Heaven!—I am thine.
Therefore we know, in this height-guarded place
Whereto the speed of our desire hath brought us;

Here in this safety crowning, like a fort
Built upon topmost peaks, the height of beauty,—
We know to be glad of life as we were gods
Timelessly glad of deity; yea, to enjoy
Fleshly, spiritual Being till the swift
Torrent of glee (as hurled star-dust can change
Dim earthly weather to a moment like the sun,)
Doth startle life to self-adoring godhead,—
Divine body of Power and divine
Burning soul of Light and self-desire.
And having given ourselves all to amazement,
We are made like a prophesying song
Of life all joy, a bride in the arms of God.—
Yea, God shall marry his people at the last;
And every man and woman who has sworn
That only joy can make this Being sacred,
Weaves at the wedding-garment.

SHE. Ah, my beloved,
Feelest thou too that out of earth and time
We are transgressing into Heavenly hours?
Or, threading the dark worldly multitude
And making lightning of its path, there comes
A zeal from God posting along our lives.

HE. For some eternal pulse hath chosen us,
Some divine anger beats within our hearts.

SHE. Anger? But how far off is love from anger!

HE. Nay, both belong to joy; joy's kind is twain.
And close as in the pouring of sun-flame
Are mingled glory of light and fury of heat,
Joy utters its twin radiance, love and anger;
If joy be not indeed all sacred wrath
With circumstance; indignant memory
Of what hath been, when the new lusts of God
Exulted unimaginably, before
Rigours of law fastened like creeping habit
Upon their measureless wont, and forced them drive
Their ranging music of delighted being

Through the fixt beating tune of a circling world.—
Is not love so? Amazement of an anger
Against created shape and narrowness?
The bound rage of the uncreated Spirit
Whose striving doth impassion us and the world?
A wrath that thou and I are not one being?

SHE. Yes, and not only words that thou and I
Out of our sexes with a flame's escape
Are fashioned into one. The Spirit in us
Hath, like imagination in a prison,
Kindled itself free of all boundary,
So that it hath no room but its own joy,
Ample as at the first, before it fell
Into this burthenous habit of a world.
What have we now to do with the world? We are
Made one unworldly thing; we are past the world;
Yea, and unmade: we are immortality.

HE. And only fools abominably crazed,
Those who will set imagination down
As less in truth than their dim sensual wit,
Dare doubt that, while these dreams of ours, these bodies,
Still quiver in the world each with its own
Delight, the great divine wrath of our love
Hath stricken off from us the place of the world!
Yea, as we walk in spiritual freedom
Upright before the shining face of God,
Behold, as it were the shadow of our stature
Thrown by that light, we draw the world behind us,—
That world wherein, darkly I remember,
We thought we were as twain.

SHE. Yet, since God means
That love should sunder our fixt separateness
And make our married spirits leap together,
As lightning out of the clouds of sexual flesh,
Into one sexless undivided joy;
Why hath he made us a divided flesh?
We being single ecstasy, now as strange

As if a shadow stained where no one stood
The ground in the noon-glare, seemeth to me
The long blind time wherein our lives and the world
Lay stretcht out dark upon the light of heaven,
Like shadow of some bulk that took the glory;
While yet there stood not over it, to shade
The splendour from it, our heaven-fronting love,
This great new soul that our two souls have kindled.
Yea, and how like, that in the world's chance-medley
This our exulting destiny had been slain,
Though here it lords the world as a man his shadow!

HE. But the world is not chance, except to those
Most feeble in desire: who needeth aught
Shall have it, if he fill his soul with the need.
While still our ignorant lives were drowned beneath
The flooding of the earthly fate, and chance
Seemed pouring mightily dark and loud between us,
Unspeakable news oft visited our hearts:
We knew each other by desire; yea, spake
Out of the strength of darkness flowing o'er us,
Across the hindering outcry of the world
One to another sweet desirable things.
Until at last we took such heavenly lust
Of those unheard messages into our lives,
We were made abler than the worldly fate.
We held its random enmity as frost
The storming Northern seas, and fastened it
In likeness of our love's imagining;
Or as a captain with his courage holds
The mutinous blood of an army aghast with fear,
And maketh it unwillingly dare his purpose,
Our lust of love struck its commandment deep
Into the froward turbulence of world
That parted us. Suddenly the dark noise
Cleft and went backward from us, and we stood
Knowing each other in a quiet light;
And like wise music made of many strings

Following and adoring underneath
Prevailing song, fate lived beneath our love,
Under the masterful excellent silence of it,
A multitudinous obedience.

SHE. Yea, but not this my marvel: not that we
Should master with desire the sundering world,
We who bore in our hearts such destiny,
There was no force knew to be dangerous
Against it, but must turn its malice clean
Into obsequious favour worshipping us.
Rather hath this astonisht me, that we
Have not for ever lived in this high hour.
Only to be twin elements of joy
In this extravagance of Being, Love,
Were our divided natures shaped in twain;
And to this hour the whole world must consent.
Is it not very marvellous, our lives
Can only come to this out of a long
Strange sundering, with the years of the world between us?

HE. Shall life do more than God? for hath not God
Striven with himself, when into known delight
His unaccomplisht joy he would put forth,—
This mystery of a world sign of his striving?
Else wherefore this, a thing to break the mind
With labouring in the wonder of it, that here
Being—the world and we—is suffered to be!—
But, lying on thy breast one notable day,
Sudden exceeding agony of love
Made my mind a trance of infinite knowledge.
I was not: yet I saw the will of God
As light unfashion'd, unendurable flame,
Interminable, not to be supposed;
And there was no more creature except light,—
The dreadful burning of the lonely God's
Unutter'd joy. And then, past telling, came
Shuddering and division in the light:
Therein, like trembling, was desire to know

Its own perfect beauty; and it became
A cloven fire, a double flaming, each
Adorable to each; against itself
Waging a burning love, which was the world;—
A moment satisfied in that love-strife
I knew the world!—And when I fell from there,
Then knew I also what this life would do
In being twain,—in being man and woman!
For it would do even as its endless Master,
Making the world, had done; yea, with itself
Would strive, and for the strife would into sex
Be cloven, double burning, made thereby
Desirable to itself. Contrivèd joy
Is sex in life; and by no other thing
Than by a perfect sundering, could life
Change the dark stream of unappointed joy
To perfect praise of itself, the glee that loves
And worships its own Being. This is ours!
Yet only for that we have been so long
Sundered desire: thence is our life all praise.—
But we, well knowing by our strength of joy
There is no sundering more, how far we love
From those sad lives that know a half-love only,
Alone thereby knowing themselves for ever
Sealed in division of love, and therefore made
To pour their strength out always into their love's
Fierceness, as green wood bleeds its hissing sap
Into red heat of a fire! Not so do we:
The cloven anger, life, hath left to wage
Its flame against itself, here turned to one
Self-adoration.—Ah, what comes of this?
The joy falters a moment, with closed wings
Wearying in its upward journey, ere
Again it goes on high, bearing its song,
Its delight breathing and its vigour beating
The highest height of the air above the world.

SHE. What hast thou done to me!—I would have soul,

Before I knew thee, Love, a captive held
By flesh. Now, inly delighted with desire,
My body knows itself to be nought else
But thy heart's worship of me; and my soul
Therein is sunlight held by warm gold air.
Nay, all my body is become a song
Upon the breath of spirit, a love-song.

HE. And mine is all like one rapt faculty,
As it were listening to the love in thee,
My whole mortality trembling to take
Thy body like heard singing of thy spirit.

SHE. Surely by this, Beloved, we must know
Our love is perfect here,—that not as holds
The common dullard thought, we are things lost
In an amazement that is all unware;
But wonderfully knowing what we are!
Lo now, that body is the song, whereof
Spirit is mood, knoweth not our delight?
Knoweth not beautifully now our love,
That Life, here to this festival bid come
Clad in his splendour of worldly day and night,
Filled and empower'd by heavenly lust, is all
The glad imagination of the Spirit?

HE. Were it not so, Love could not be at all:
Nought could be, but a yearning to fulfil
Desire of beauty, by vain reaching forth
Of sense to hold and understand the vision
Made by impassion'd body,—vision of thee!
But music mixt with music are, in love,
Bodily senses; and as flame hath light,
Spirit this nature hath imagined round it,
No way concealed therein, when love comes near,
Nor in the perfect wedding of desires
Suffering any hindrance.

SHE. Ah, but now,
Now am I given love's eternal secret!
Yea, thou and I who speak, are but the joy

Of our for ever mated spirits; but now
The wisdom of my gladness even through Spirit
Looks, divinely elate. Who hath for joy
Our Spirits? Who hath imagined them
Round him in fashion'd radiance of desire,
As into light of these exulting bodies
Flaming Spirit is uttered?

HE. Yea, here the end
Of love's astonishment! Now know we Spirit,
And Who, for ease of joy, contriveth Spirit.
Now all life's loveliness and power we have
Dissolved in this one moment, and our burning
Carries all shining upward, till in us
Life is not life, but the desire of God,
Himself desiring and himself accepting.
Now what was prophecy in us is made
Fulfilment: we are the hour and we are the joy,—
We in our marvellousness of single knowledge,—
Of Spirit breaking down the room of fate
And drawing into his light the greeting fire
Of God,—God known in ecstasy of love
Wedding himself to utterance of himself.

MARRIAGE SONG

I

Come up, dear chosen morning, come,
Blessing the air with light,
And bid the sky repent of being dark:
Let all the spaces round the world be white,
And give the earth her green again.
Into new hours of beautiful delight,
Out of the shadow where she has lain,
Bring the earth awake for glee,
Shining with dews as fresh and clear
As my beloved's voice upon the air.
For now, O morning chosen of all days, on thee
A wondrous duty lies:
There was an evening that did loveliness foretell;
Thence upon thee, O chosen morn, it fell
To fashion into perfect destiny
The radiant prophecy.
For in an evening of young moon, that went
Filling the moist air with a rosy fire,
I and my beloved knew our love;
And knew that thou, O morning, wouldst arise
To give us knowledge of achieved desire.
For, standing stricken with astonishment,
Half terrified in the delight,
Even as the moon did into clear air move
And made a golden light,
Lo there, croucht up against it, a dark hill,
A monstrous back of earth, a spine
Of hunchèd rock, furred with great growth of pine,
Lay like a beast, snout in its paws, asleep;
Yet in its sleeping seemed it miserable,
As though strong fear must always keep

Hold of its heart, and drive its blood in dream.
Yea, for to our new love, did it not seem,
That dark and quiet length of hill,
The sleeping grief of the world?—Out of it we
Had like imaginations stept to be
Beauty and golden wonder; and for the lovely fear
Of coming perfect joy, had changed
The terror that dreamt there!
And now the golden moon had turned
To shining white, white as our souls that burned
With vision of our prophecy assured:
Suddenly white was the moon; but she
At once did on a woven modesty
Of cloud, and soon went in obscured:
And we were dark, and vanisht that strange hill.
But yet it was not long before
There opened in the sky a narrow door,
Made with pearl lintel and pearl sill;
And the earth's night seem'd pressing there,—
All as a beggar on some festival would peer,—
To gaze into a room of light beyond,
The hidden silver splendour of the moon.
Yea, and we also, we
Long gazed wistfully
Towards thee, O morning, come at last,
And towards the light that thou wilt pour upon us soon!

II

O soul who still art strange to sense,
Who often against beauty wouldst complain,
Doubting between joy and pain:
If like the startling touch of something keen
Against thee, it hath been
To follow from an upland height
The swift sun hunting rain
Across the April meadows of a plain,
Until the fields would flash into the air

Their joyous green, like emeralds alight;
Or when in the blue of night's mid-noon
The burning naked moon
Draws to a brink of cloudy weather near,
A breadth of snow, firm and soft as a wing,
Strétcht out over a wind that gently goes,—
Through the white sleep of snowy cloud there grows
An azure-border'd shining ring,
The gleaming dream of the approaching joy of her;—
What now wilt thou do, Soul? What now,
If with such things as these troubled thou wert?
How wilt thou now endure, or how
Not now be strangely hurt?—
When utter beauty must come closer to thee
Than even anger or fear could be;
When thou, like metal in a kiln, must lie
Seized by beauty's mightily able flame;
Enjoyed by beauty as by the ruthless glee
Of an unescapable power;
Obeying beauty as air obeys a cry;
Yea, one thing made of beauty and thee,
As steel and a white heat are made the same!
—Ah, but I know how this infirmity
Will fail and be not, no, not memory,
When I begin the marvellous hour.
This only is my heart's strain'd eagerness,
Long waiting for its bliss.—
But from those other fears, from those
That keep to Love so close,
From fears that are the shadow of delight,
Hide me, O joys; make them unknown to-night!

III

Thou bright God that in dream camest to me last night,
Thou with the flesh made of a golden light,
Knew I not thee, thee and thy heart,
Knew I not well, God, who thou wert?

Yea, and my soul divinely understood
The light that was beneath thee a ground,
The golden light that cover'd thee round,
Turning my sleep to a fiery morn,
Was as a heavenly oath there sworn
Promising me an immortal good:
Well I knew thee, God of Marriages, thee and thy flame!
Ah, but wherefore beside thee came
That fearful sight of another mood?
Why in thy light, to thy hand chained,
Towards me its bondage terribly strained,
Why came with thee that dreadful hound,
The wild hound Fear, black, ravenous and gaunt?
Why him with thee should thy dear light surround?
Why broughtest thou that beast to haunt
The blissful footsteps of my golden dream?—
All shadowy black the body dread,
All frenzied fire the head,—
The hunger of its mouth a hollow crimson flame,
The hatred in its eyes a blaze
Fierce and green, stabbing the ruddy glaze,
And sharp white jetting fire the teeth snarl'd at me,
And white the dribbling rage of froth,—
A throat that gaped to bay and paws working violently,
Yet soundless all as a winging moth;
Tugging towards me, famishing for my heart;—
Even while thou, O golden god, wert still
Looking the beautiful kindness of thy will
Into my soul, even then must I be,
With thy bright promise looking at me,
Then bitterly of that hound afraid?—
Darkness, I know, attendeth bright,
And light comes not but shadow comes:
And heart must know, if it know thy light,
Thy wild hound Fear, the shadow of love's delight.
Yea, is it thus? Are we so made
Of death and darkness, that even thou,

O golden God of the joys of love,
Thy mind to us canst only prove,
The glorious devices of thy mind,
By so revealing how thy journeying here
Through this mortality, doth closely bind
Thy brightness to the shadow of dreadful Fear?—
Ah no, it shall not be! Thy joyous light
Shall hide me from the hunger of fear to-night.

IV

For wonderfully to live I now begin:
So that the darkness which accompanies
Our being here, is fasten'd up within
The power of light that holdeth me;
And from these shining chains, to see
My joy with bold misliking eyes,
The shrouded figure will not dare arise.
For henceforth, from to-night,
I am wholly gone into the bright
Safety of the beauty of love:
Not only all my waking vigours plied
Under the searching glory of love,
But knowing myself with love all satisfied
Even when my life is hidden in sleep;
As high clouds, to themselves that keep
The moon's white company, are all possest
Silverly with the presence of their guest;
Or as a darken'd room
That hath within it roses, whence the air
And quietness are taken everywhere
Deliciously by sweet perfume.

EPILOGUE

WHAT shall we do for Love these days?
How shall we make an altar-blaze
To smite the horny eyes of men
With the renown of our Heaven,
And to the unbelievers prove
Our service to our dear god, Love?
What torches shall we lift above
The crowd that pushes through the mire,
To amaze the dark heads with strange fire?
I should think I were much to blame,
If never I held some fragrant flame
Above the noises of the world,
And openly 'mid men's hurrying stares,
Worshipt before the sacred fears
That are like flashing curtains furl'd
Across the presence of our lord Love.
Nay, would that I could fill the gaze
Of the whole earth with some great praise
Made in a marvel for men's eyes,
Some tower of glittering masonries,
Therein such a spirit flourishing
Men should see what my heart can sing:
All that Love hath done to me
Built into stone, a visible glee;
Marble carried to gleaming height
As moved aloft by inward delight;
Not as with toil of chisels hewn,
But seeming poised in a mighty tune.
For of all those who have been known
To lodge with our kind host, the sun,
I envy one for just one thing:
In Cordova of the Moors
There dwelt a passion-minded King,
Who set great bands of marble-hewers
To fashion his heart's thanksgiving

In a tall palace, shapen so
All the wondering world might know
The joy he had of his Moorish lass.
His love, that brighter and larger was
Than the starry places, into firm stone
He sent, as if the stone were glass
Fired and into beauty blown.
  Solemn and invented gravely
In its bulk the fabric stood,
Even as Love, that trusteth bravely
In its own exceeding good
To be better than the waste
Of time's devices; grandly spaced,
Seriously the fabric stood.
But over it all a pleasure went
Of carven delicate ornament,
Wreathing up like ravishment,
Mentioning in sculptures twined
The blitheness Love hath in his mind;
And like delighted senses were
The windows, and the columns there
Made the following sight to ache
As the heart that did them make.
Well I can see that shining song
Flowering there, the upward throng
Of porches, pillars and windowed walls,
Spires like piercing panpipe calls,
Up to the roof's snow-cloud flight;
All glancing in the Spanish light
White as water of arctic tides,
Save an amber dazzle on sunny sides.
You had said, the radiant sheen
Of that palace might have been
A young god's fantasy, ere he came
His serious worlds and suns to frame;
Such an immortal passion
Quiver'd among the slim hewn stone.

And in the nights it seemed a jar
Cut in the substance of a star,
Wherein a wine, that will be poured
Some time for feasting Heaven, was stored.
  But within this fretted shell,
The wonder of Love made visible,
The King a private gentle mood
There placed, of pleasant quietude.
For right amidst there was a court,
Where always muskèd silences
Listened to water and to trees;
And herbage of all fragrant sort,—
Lavender, lad's-love, rosemary,
Basil, tansy, centaury,—
Was the grass of that orchard, hid
Love's amazements all amid.
Jarring the air with rumour cool,
Small fountains played into a pool
With sound as soft as the barley's hiss
When its beard just sprouting is;
Whence a young stream, that trod on moss,
Prettily rimpled the court across.
And in the pool's clear idleness,
Moving like dreams through happiness,
Shoals of small bright fishes were;
In and out weed-thickets bent
Perch and carp, and sauntering went
With mounching jaws and eyes a-stare;
Or on a lotus leaf would crawl
A brinded loach to bask and sprawl,
Tasting the warm sun ere it dipt
Into the water; but quick as fear
Back his shining brown head slipt
To crouch on the gravel of his lair,
Where the cooled sunbeams broke in wrack,
Spilt shatter'd gold about his back.
  So within that green-veiled air,

Within that white-wall quiet, where
Innocent water thought aloud,—
Childish prattle that must make
The wise sunlight with laughter shake
On the leafage overbowed,—
Often the King and his love-lass
Let the delicious hours pass.
All the outer world could see
Graved and sawn amazingly
Their love's delighted riotise,
Fixt in marble for all men's eyes;
But only these twain could abide
In the cool peace that withinside
Thrilling desire and passion dwelt;
They only knew the still meaning spelt
By Love's flaming script, which is
God's word written in ecstasies.
And where is now that palace gone,
All the magical skill'd stone,
All the dreaming towers wrought
By Love as if no more than thought
The unresisting marble was?
How could such a wonder pass?
Ah, it was but built in vain
Against the stupid horns of Rome,
That pusht down into the common loam
The loveliness that shone in Spain.
But we have raised it up again!
A loftier palace, fairer far,
Is ours, and one that fears no war.
Safe in marvellous walls we are;
Wondering sense like builded fires,
High amazement of desires,
Delight and certainty of love,
Closing around, roofing above
Our unapproacht and perfect hour
Within the splendours of love's power.

TWELVE IDYLS

TO
ELIZABETH AND ROBERT TREVELYAN

MARY AND THE BRAMBLE

TO MY MOTHER

THE great blue ceremony of the air
Did a new morrow for the earth prepare;
The silver troops of mist were almost crept
Back to the streams where through the day they slept;
And, high up on his tower of song, the glad
Galloping wings of a lark already had
A message from the sun, to give bright warning
That he would shortly make a golden morning.
It was a dawn when the year is earliest.
Mary, in her rapt girlhood, from her rest
Came for the hour to wash her soul. Now she
Beheld, with eyes like the rain-shadowed sea,
Of late an urgency disturb the world;
Her thought that, like a curtain wide unfurl'd
With stir of a hurrying throng against it prest,
Seen things flutter'd with spiritual haste
Behind them, as a rush of wingèd zeal
Made with its gusty passage shiver and reel,
Like a loose weaving, all the work of sense.
Surely not always could such vehemence
Of Spirit stay all shrouded in the green
Appearance of earth's knowledgeable mien:
Ay, see this morning trembling like a sail!
Can it still hold the strain? must it not fail
Even now? for lo how it doth thrill and bend!
Will not, as a torn cloth, earth's season rend
Before this shaking wind of Heaven's speed,
And show her God's obediences indeed
Burning along behind it? Never yet
Was such a fever in the frail earth set
By those hid throngs posting behind its veil!

Unfearing were her eyes; yet would they quail
A little when the curtain seemed nigh torn,
The shining weft of kind clear-weather'd morn,
In pressure of near Spirit forcing it.
And as she walkt, the marvel would permit
Scarce any love for the earth's delighted dress.
Through meadows flowering with happiness
Went Mary, feeling not the air that laid
Honours of gentle dew upon her head;
Nor that the sun now loved with golden stare
The marvellous behaviour of her hair,
Bending with finer swerve from off her brow
Than water which relents before a prow:
Till in the shining darkness many a gleam
Of secret bronze-red lustres answered him.

The Spirit of Life vaunted itself: 'Ho ye
Who wear the Heavens, now look down to me!
I too can praise. My dark encumberment
Of earth, whereinto I was hardly sent,
I have up-wielded as the fire wields flame,
And turned it into glory of God's name:
Till now a praise as good as yours I can,
For now my speech, the long-stammer'd being of Man,
Rises into its mightiest, sweetest word.'
Not vain his boast: for seemly to the Lord,
Blue-robed and yellow-kerchieft, Mary went.
There never was to God such worship sent
By any angel in the Heavenly ways,
As this that Life had utter'd for God's praise,
This girlhood—as the service that Life said
In the beauty and the manners of this maid.
Never the harps of Heaven played such song
As her grave walking through the grasses long.
Yea, out of Jewry came the proof in her
That the angel Life was God's best worshipper.

Now in her vision'd walk beside a brake

Is Mary passing, wherein brambles make
A tangled malice, grown to such a riddle
That any grimness crouching in the middle
Were not espied. Bewildered was the place,
Like a brain full of folly and disgrace;
And with its thorny toils it seemed to be
A naughty heart devising cruelty.
Ready it was with all its small keen spite
To catch at anything that walkt upright,
Although a miching weasel safely went
Therethrough. And close to this entanglement,
This little world out of unkindness made,
With eyes beyond her path young Mary strayed.
As an unheeded bramble's reach she crost,
Her breast a spiny sinew did accost
With eager thorns, tearing her dress to seize
And harm her hidden white virginities.
To it she spake, with such a gentle air
That the thing might not choose but answer her.

'What meanest thou, O Bramble,
So to hurt my breast?
Why is thy sharp cruelty
Against my heart prest?'

'How can I help, O Mary,
Dealing wound to thee?
Thou hast Heaven's favour:
I am mortality.'

'If I, who am thy sister,
Am in Heaven's love,
If it be so, then should it not
Thee to gladness move?'

'Nay, nay, it moves me only
Quietly to wait,
Till I can surely seize thy heart
In my twisting hate.'

'Ah, thou hast pierced my paps, bramble,
Thy thorns are in my blood;
Tell me for why, thou cruel growth,
Thy malice is so rude.'

'Thou art looking, Mary,
Beyond the world to be:
If I cannot grapple thee down to the world,
I can injure thee.'

'Ah, thy wicked daggers now
Into my nipple cling:
It is like guilt, so to be held
In thy harsh fingering.'

The little leaves were language still,
And gave their voice to Mary's will;
But till the bramble's word was said,
Thorns clutcht hard upon the maid.
'Yes, like guilt, for guilt am I,
Sin and wrong and misery.
For thy heart guilt is feeling;
Hurt for which there is no healing
Must the bramble do to thee,
If thou wilt not guilty be.
Know'st thou me? These nails of hate
Are the fastenings of the weight
Of substance which thy God did bind
Upon thy upward-meaning mind.
Life has greatly sworn to be
High as the brows of God in thee;
But I am heaviness, and I
Would hold thee down from being high.
Thou thyself by thy straining
Hast made my weight a wicked thing;
Here in the bramble now I sit
And tear thy flesh with the spines of it.

Yet into my desires come,
And like a worshipping bridegroom
I will turn thy life to dream,
All delicious love to seem.
But if in Heaven God shall wear
Before any worship there
Thy Spirit, and Life boasteth this,
Thou must break through the injuries
And shames I will about thee wind,
The hooks and thickets of my kind;
The whole earth's nature will come to be
Full of my purpose against thee:
Yea, worse than a bramble's handling, men
Shall use thy bosom, Mary, then.
And yet I know that by these scars
I make thee better than the stars
For God to wear; and thou wilt ride
On the lusts that have thee tried,
The murders that fell short of thee,
Like charioting in a victory;
Like shafted horses thou wilt drive
The crimes that I on earth made thrive
Against thee, into Heaven to draw
Thy soul out of my heinous law.
But now in midst of my growth thou art,
And I have thee by the heart;
And closer shall I seize on thee
Even than this; a gallows-tree
Shall bear a bramble-coil on high;
Then twisted about thy soul am I,
Then a withe of my will is bound
Strangling thy very ghost around.'

Homeward went Mary, nursing fearfully
The bleeding badges of that cruelty.
Now closer spiritual turbulence whirled
Against her filmy vision of the world,

Which was like shaken silk, so gravely leant
The moving of that throng'd astonishment
On the far side: the time was near at hand
When Gabriel with the fiery-flower'd wand
Would part the tissue of her bodily ken,
And to the opening all God's shining men
Would crowd to watch the message that he took
To earthly life: 'Hail, Mary, that dost look
Delightful to the Lord; I bid thee know
That answering God's own love thy womb shall throe.'

THE INNOCENTS

NIGHT had squander'd over the glowing air
The thousands of her stars. A slender woman
Smiled at them as she hurried from the farm,
After the long day of a widow's toil:
With her heart planning eager things at home,
Smiling she faced the loft of Syrian night,
As if her mind knew how to match itself
With those blue depths and that immortal trance
Of blissful fire, the stars of Palestine.

'You cannot look me down! Here on the earth
Stumbling and tired and unnoticeable
I go; and you are bright and endless heaven.
Yet I can live as measureless as you,
O darkness, in the sorrow of my love;
And surely in my love's delight my heart
Can mock the whitest of your quivering stars.
Death is as great as you; and I am love
Whose region now is death—O emptiness
About me where my longing for my lover
Glows dark and boundless as your infinite blue!—
Ah, but as well and in the midst of this,
My life is like the clustering of starlight
In silver dances of its fiery glee:

My shining life adoring with its love
The little laughing son my lover gave me.
O night, burning joy and room unending,
I know where you are equalled, I that am
Love of a lover dead and a son living!'

By this there should have been a golden eye
Of candle-light watching for her approach.
But there was only night in front of her:
The house was dark, a piece of blacker night;
And night of a more jealous silence held
About its walls, and was shockt by her steps.
She felt it did not know her, such a blank
It stood, a rapt and heedless thing. But quick
To push the door she was, and stand within
Listening; and for one tick of her heart
It seemed the mood of the house at the stir she made
Shrank off and shudder'd away from her; and then
Came settling back and closed over her brain.
And at once gentleness of outdoor dark
With all its easing of the sense of things,
Alter'd to graver darkness, loading on her,
Pressing down as thick as deep-sea water.

But she was hungry for her hour. She stoopt
To peer into the room, and held her arms
Ready to catch the boy running to her.

'You are both very still! Is this to be
A hiding game? Where are you, little deceiver?
Sweetheart, just one laugh! and home in a pounce
I'll track your voice, my minim of the rogues.
Out with a jump, frighten me!—Mother, where is he?
Where are you, mother?—Gone? They can't be gone!'

She started forward; but her mother's voice
Spoke from the back of the room, very low
And even: a tone that took her by the soul.

'Be careful. Make a light before you move,
Else you may trip——.'
'How can I make a light?
The tinder-box must be by you. Quick, strike!
Has he been harmed?'
'Near me, yes: I forgot.
Keep where you are: wait for the light; I'm bound
To fumble, with this wicked cramp in me.
I've harden'd into an image, sitting here
So long. And I'm not ready for you yet.
I was just trying over what I'ld say.'
'How was he hurt? Have you put him to bed?'
'I tell you, wait; not an inch nearer, girl!——
It glows at last. Now for these doddering hands
To manage with the candle. And I hope
God will be with your heart as well as mine.'

The faint light hung in a ball of yellow haze
Hovering larger and larger round the flame;
And when the room was full of it, she saw
Where the boy lay. Right at her feet he lay,
Naked, with open eyes, speared in the breast.

Her throat lockt rigid on her shrieking breath.
When her stunn'd heart could feel its terrible beating,
She found herself huddled down on the floor,
Nursing her cold boy close against the warmth
Where not long since he fed. Her blacken'd mind
Now heard her mother speaking, like a drift
Of talk floating out of a lofty window.

'It was the soldiers. They had made them drunk.
And some were laughing drunk; but most were wild,
As if they drove themselves to shouting fury
For fear they'ld be afraid; and there was one
Who cried and cried like broken-hearted madness.
"I can't be doing this," he said, "not this";

And it was he that snatcht the boy from me.—
And then the laughers and the swearers ran
Out of the house like men escaping fire,
Swearing and laughing still; and he alone
Stayed crying here, looking on what he'd done,
And saying still, "I can't do things like this." '

'But why? why? What has come to the world?'
'Messiah has come.'
'Will you jeer at me?
My baby murder'd, and Messiah come?'
'Messiah has come: this is the sign of it.'
'You crazy woman, this? And is that why
You let the fiends catch my beautiful darling?'
'It is in the stars: Messiah is born in Jewry.
And because he is born, no one can tell where,
Herod is angry and sends his soldiers out
Everywhere killing Jewish boys; and I
All afternoon must look at our beloved
Lying dead, with his frighten'd open eyes
Wondering at me. But Messiah has come;
Ay, somewhere now the woman lives whose son
Is the Messiah: and we must call her blessed.
God will take care of her: none of Herod's soldiers
Will gash her son; and when he makes the earth
His kingdom, in that sabbath of the world
This misery of ours will be forgotten.'
'O be quiet! I do not want Messiah:
I want my boy, my little nimble boy,
Warm and living and laughing. We did not need
Messiah to change the world for us: the world
Would have been ours, we would have made it ours.
My darling and I would have known how to love
Our life together of joy and grief in the world,
As if it were a music we were making.
But she must murder him with her Messiah,
That woman! So that she may be the one

All the half-hearted lives bless for Messiah,
He must be murder'd, my busy little dancer.
What good to me will be Messiah's kingdom?
But let it be holiness mounting to heaven,
I will go with it; bitterly into heaven
I'll haunt it; it shall never be rid of me;
It shall remember what it has done to me,
My voice shall be an injury to it for ever.'

THE DEATH OF A FRIAR

So they would leave him there to die alone.
Why trouble more? All they could do was done;
Nothing but senseless breathing now remained
Of what the man had been. If death disdained
To notice his surrender, why should they,
Who never noticed yet the humble way
He had of living, dawdle to attend
Upon his humble dying to its end?
The unregarded serviceable man
Was finisht; any common coal that can
No longer heat the furnace was like him:
A cinder haunted by a twittering, dim,
Forsaking mutter of small, plucking flame.
And how long might it be, before there came
Negligent death contemptuously to bless
This lingering stir of mortal wretchedness
With one resolving touch, and on him cast
Mercy of cold and quietude at last?
The unregarded man had served his turn;
Some flickering round the cinder still might burn,
But 'twas a life dismisst: surely alone
He could be left to die.
When they were gone
Death came; but not in manner as they thought.
Suddenly he was awake and staring, wrought
Out of his lethargy to expect amazing

Presences there, by summons of a blazing
White and unspeakable astonishment,
That with a shatter like the lightning rent
The drowsy darkness of his dying mind.
His kindled spirit gazed abroad, to find
His cell a miracle: the magnificence
Of tawny fire crimson'd round him, whence
Gleam of delicious green played among blue,
Like heavenly flashes globed in sunlit dew;
And the air chimed, and changing fragrances
Were coolly fanned about him, as a breeze
Made by a pulse of great invisible wings
Drove spirits of flowers in sweet squanderings.
Then those he expected came: and first the Queen
Of Heaven, in all the joyful light of green
Moving that ever glowed in grass or glanced
From falling water, and every blue entranced
In summer bliss of deep seas, and the height
Of air from April noon to June midnight.
So in her paradise she came, and shed
The colour of its climate round his bed.
But fire, and mighty fire, attended her,
Three tranquil majesties of fire; and where
Their golden pacing trod, there was no ground,
But gulf; for downward without end or bound
Vacancy open'd underneath their station,
And darkness of the world's annihilation
There burned more blinding than their white-hot wings.
Thus on the empty vanishing of things
The angels stood, Mary, obediences,
In fiery rank behind her loveliness;
Composed and patient their immortal zeal:
Their faces splendour as of molten steel;
Brightness in folds that thrill'd like scarlet heat
In silver, falling to their golden feet;
And in the steadfast flaming of their wings
A mounting ripple of fierce quiverings

Sparkling terribly—the infinite ascending
Of Fire unbeginning and unending,
Whereof their persons were the shapely flames.

In passion the man cried, as one who claims
Rescue with agony of all his strength,
'Mother of God, may I not die at length?'
Whether it music were he could not tell
That answered him, or an insensible
Piercing of ravishment into his brain;
But thus the meaning spoke: 'Now for thy pain
Have thy reward! I bring electuaries,
Made of such honey and such herbs that thrice,
Tasting of these, into delight extreme
Thou shalt be changed as ever heart could dream:
And they shall make it well with thee after all.'
Askance, for fear the mere glimpse should appal
His seeing to a blank, beyond the bound
Of gleam delectable that sphered him round,
He eyed those glittering statures where they stood
Quietly ardent; and with a blench he could
See there were caskets in their dazzling hands.
But instantly they knew their Queen's commands;
And the first splendour for her ministry,
Bearing his casket of electuary,
Strode forth, making his way the yawn'd abyss
Beneath him; and as he near'd the bliss
The man lay in, the paradise of hues
That Mary loved him with, the sheltering blues
Mingled with sweet surprise of green, began
To glare a burning amber, and there ran
Through the translucency of azure shade
Reddening curls of lustre, and a blade
Of whitening vehemence: till the man sealed his sight
Against the full severe angelic light.

His service done, and Mary with his first

Of sacred food that poor heart having nurst,
Back to his place the stately angel went
To shine beside his brothers there; content,
As when his Queen her miracle began,
To wait upon her dealing with this man.

'Take now thy first delight!'
The signs of it
Were these: but the joy was an infinite
Exceeding its occasions, even these.
For stript from his life were labour and disease
Like unclean wrapping, and the shame to be
Indecent servitude to malady.
As if his flesh were all new exquisite sense
Assuming a divine experience,
Health was the thing he knew, health quick and beating.
Fine as a mind strange radiant beauty greeting,
His subtle body knew his health, and made
Bodily joy of it: joy his sinews said,
Muscles and skin and the hairs upon his skin,
Bones and the secret pith of the bones within,
Were intellectual speech of joy, and each
Marvelling distinctly in joyous speech
Of mere delighted faculty, aware
Of health and the beauty of health. And long time there,
Receiving each elate particular glee
Of his brave body in serene harmony,
And passionately still, he lay intense,
Not to disturb the lucid affluence
Of health along the nerves of his delight:
Collected so in this, that even of sight
His will was jealous, and kept closed his eyes.
But slowly out to ampler boundaries
Rejoicing knowledge well'd its way; and soon
He knew where he was lying: and high noon
Above, and under him the crisp and spring
Of sheep-bit turf, and round him whispering

Short mountain grass to gentle mountain airs
He knew. Untouchable by men's affairs,
The great slope of the mountain held him high
And lonely, offered to sunlight and the sky.
There in his wholesome flesh he took his rest,
His eyes still shut: not seizure now of zest
That fastened every motion, but because
All his desires closed in this heavenly pause
Of rest perfected in the loftiest
Of light and air—his joy now all in rest,
And rest sensibly loving him from the profound
Of his hale body, and out of the vast surround
He felt unseeing of the mountain's day.
In mere simplicity of joy he lay.
No sight: no matter if the wind should teaze
Fleeces of cloud to thin white delicacies
Brusht clean across the blue in curve and stroke
(Loveliest thing to see), he would not look.
No sound: but a continual passing by
Of living silences; save, far or nigh,
Some sound belonging to the silences
Would drop like diamond; and chiefly these:
Down falls of moss small water into wells
Ringing in glassy little syllables;
And quivering glides of cadence shrill and rare
Of curlews whistling down the shining air.

There was the touch of power on his head,
The hand of the goddess; and it was into dread
She roused him, dread of any greater bliss:
'No more, no more! I want no more than this!
This was enough!'—the anguish of a child.
But Mary's love inexorably smiled;
The second angel came, and at his side
Gloried, and went back blazing to abide
In those devoted wings of throbbing fire,
A white-gold instinct one with her desire;

And with the second of the electuaries,
Fulfilling to the end her promises,
She bid the man: 'Now take thy next delight!'
Not to be named, but as to think starlight
Enlarging measurelessly circular
In utterance round the bright point of a star,
The tale of joys the man's life now must be.
Nay, such a speed and such perplexity
Of pleasured sense and mind's beatitude,
Not to be named at all, not understood,
No spectre of it fantastically kenn'd,
The joy his spirit came to in the end.
It began sweetly. Fragrance to him stole,
With calling of blithe thrush and oriole,
From cherry orchards that a sauntering breeze
Has visited, when each garth of crowded trees
Is one broad mound of happy blossoming,
White as a cloud from the new heaven of spring
Fallen to lie on green. But sharper scent
Flowed in, dividing this mild air, and went
Spicing the inmost chambers of his brain:
Gorse steept in sunshine, sweetbriar in warm rain,
Kindling of rosemary; and many more
Unknown: to odours that for tenderest core
Of feeling pry'd with searching nicety
Like spirit's smouldering fingers, now must he
Submit his being. Gust in his mouth, that past
Apples and honey, was power to hold fast
His saturated mind. Sense into sense
Confused; and medley of sweet excellence
Poured into him vibrating, like a tide
Taking a narrow harbour and magnified
In surging of its waters to be there:
Such thronging in, such narrowed turbulence were
The floods of delicate tumult in his mind,
The race in undistinguishable kind
Of the world's rapture into him: the quire

Of colours, and in flights of glistering fire
The music there—amethyst, chrysolite,
And topaz, reeds and strings and horns; and white,
Whiter than moonlight on a sword, a noise
Crystalline bright, like the singing of boys.
Then out of sense he broke; no more by sense
He was aware, but his intelligence
Was now to Be, not know: life, conscious still
In thought and in a body incredible,
Became the beauty sense could only know:
Himself a sound of music—naked so
To all the pulses of rejoicing things,
Fibres of mind alike and bodily strings
Took trembling thence the passion of a sound;
And light he was, out of him glorying round
Issue of living light—the joy adoring
The gift of light become itself outpouring
Of answering light: his thought pure power of light,
And torrents of flashing particles icily bright
His blood, in limbs of flesh like fiery glass.
Not beyond this could vivid substance pass:
As if this speck of being, this body and mind,
In one essential energy combined
The shining din of the whole creature of light
And music of the burning world's delight.
Then something new and nameless: a caress
Blandishing dark and silent all the stress
Of joys intelligible, and through him sending
Blissful dissolution and an ending.
And he was free, thoughtless and bodiless,
Having no form, acknowledging no place:
A speed, a phantom speed for ever fleeing,
Speed the uttermost purity of being,
Speed the imperishable thing in things,
The changeless ghost about which changeably clings
The growth and dying of the world: in speed
Out of the momentary man is freed

Unquenchable phantom purity of being,
The speed beyond the world for ever fleeing.

Once more where Mary and her angels stood,
The panting body and the pelting blood
And the confounded mind came back to be
Of common men the common misery;
But he by mighty memory pursued—
Longing to have it, and fearful lest it should
Descend on him. But more he durst not know:
'O let me be! Thou wilt not give me, no,
Thou must not give me more! For I have been
Where no more can be borne: O dost thou mean
To kill me with delight?'—The Queen of Heaven
Impassibly smiled: 'More shall yet be given.
There is a third delight.'—And by him stands
Now the third angel: in the blinding hands
The third electuary.
And heaven was gone;
And in his last delight he lay alone.
The morning found his blessed face, and there
The joy that is too great for life to bear.

AT ENDOR

THE GHOST OF SAMUEL

Behold me, then!—Who has sent for me here?
Who has required the tomb
To yield me up? I come
Out of death to thee: behold me, and fear!

THE WITCH

Fear thee! What should I fear, what harm
From ghost so faithful to my charm?

THE GHOST OF SAMUEL

What power art thou, to meddle with the dead?
Who gave thee leave to hound

My dead soul underground,
And out of the hollow world's dark core of dread
Draw me helpless in obedience
To ache in this remember'd sense
Of earthly things again?
Who gave thy mind to be
Radiance of such piercing ecstasy
It thrilled down to the dead its craving agony?
The stone above us to its force
Was glass to blazing light or morning air to trumpets:
Cleaving through the grave thy message made its course.
It smote apart the swarming dead
That huddled surging back and fled,
As a prow puts aside the water in its way,
Over the bowing waves superbly passing on.
For it was want of me alone
That came so mightily:
I was the thing demanded, I the chosen prey
Thy hungering passion found,
With all death's infamy humming round.
Tier above tier of spectral glee
Upon my ignominy stared:
Idlers, malignants, folly and lechery,
Scoffers and cheats and hordes of idolatry—
When all this filth was spared,
I alone, out of the whole world's burial,
I must be fetcht away before them all:
I, whom God spoke to once and loved,
I only am not left in peace.
What must I do for my release?
Or is thy mastery proved?

THE WITCH

And this was Samuel!—First I praise
Obedience prompt as ever thou wouldst give
Jehovah in the famous days
When He was on thy side, and let thee live

With Heaven's public favour on thy brow.
But thou art dead, thy body under a stone,
Thy spirit where no living god is known:
My will is thy Jehovah now.

THE GHOST OF SAMUEL

Ay, well I see how vile it is to die:
I know thee, and thy sorcery!
When I had life and God with me,
The light was dangerous to thee;
Thou and thy art must burrow into holes,
Cunningly in the hillside deserts housing:
And often among the stones thy hunted drowsing
Dreamt I had got thee at last and had thee on the coals!
Now I, that once was sacred life, am made
Matter for thy obscene trade.
But rain, that has gone gleaming white,
High in heavenly wind and light,
Falling, drains into the sewers of a town
And pours in darkness there,
Forgotten with the offal scouring down,
Mixt with the grime of roads and staling of horses.
So falling into death my soul is brought
To flow along thy will, and be mixture with thy thought.

THE WITCH

Lo, Samuel's reward
For serving well his Lord!
These are the wages thy Most High
Pays his champions when they die:
Fool! dead fool! and wilt thou still be good?
Thou wert alive when a god beside thee,
Swearing to deal with thy enemies, stood
Flourishing his anger like a headsman's sword:
What is the god thou hast with thee in the grave?
What stroke of flame comes leaping now to save
Thy spirit from me, thy spirit from sorcery?
O thou prophet of the terrible Lord,

Now an old witch can god thee with a word!
Certainly a fallen storm is thy spirit!
Loud as a storm of hail were thy prophecies:
But very soon the troublesome sound
Passes, the whiten'd pelted ground
In a bright hour cheerfully dries;
And down to the wells the melting hail
Trickles away; and a child with a pail
Winds up easily what once was a storm,
Mere innocent quiet water!
Even so from the pit below
I draw this harmless Samuel:
The storm that sounded once like God I bring
Hither to be my serviceable thing.

THE GHOST OF SAMUEL

Enough. I am thine: but I was God's.
In that vast shadow underneath the earth
Evil and good are of an equal worth:
Malice is one with sanctity,
For both are dead there, both are nothing.
Must it not always be
That lucid steel is humbled into rust?
And must it even be
For the bitter mind of evil—ay! for *thee*—
To wield my spirit now lightly as wind the dust?
But once I was alive; and then
I was the voice of God calling on living men;
And with their lives they answered me.
Men must not be mere swarm on earth,
Like maggots in a carcase prospering;
But, all their countless birth
Of perishing happiness transfiguring,
An increase of rejoicing energy,
Designing its great image in their lives
In gradual promise of their destiny.
And I have seen it. I have seen

Flame like the sun earth's living green,
To be the splendour of the place
Wherein man consummates his race.
For the whole kind of man I have seen
One blessed creature at the last:
Lovely as the divinely fortunate stars
Innumerably burn in one consent
Of perfect motion round their firmament,
One everlasting music there
Of manifold joyous light,
Wherewith to be so glorified
Exults in glowing blue the night.
Even in such security here
Shall beauty on the earth abide,
When all men's lives at last make one immense
Heavenly intelligence,
That like the sphered starlight
Its own illustrious experience
Immortally enjoys:
Imagination that so shapely thrives
And passion so divinely bright,
That, shapely and bright as an untroubled flame
Lives in its vanishing substance still the same,
Steadfast in the change of ever-dying lives
The changeless figure of undying beauty grows,
The same whoever comes or goes,
The mind of God made man.
Let thy art use me all it can!
This is not in thy power—that men have seen
The beauty God and I have meant.
Yea, am I dead, and thine?—But I have been
Alive, and I was God's. I am content.

WITCHCRAFT: NEW STYLE

THE sun drew off at last his piercing fires.
Over the stale warm air, dull as a pond
And moveless in the grey quieted street,
Blue magic of a summer evening glowed.
The sky, that had been dazzling stone all day,
Hollowed in smooth hard brightness, now dissolved
To infinite soft depth, and smoulder'd down
Low as the roofs, dark burning blue, and soared
Clear to that winking drop of liquid silver,
The first exquisite star. Now the half-light
Tidied away the dusty litter parching
Among the cobbles, veiled in the colour of distance
Shabby slates and brickwork mouldering, turn'd
The hunchback houses into patient things
Resting; and golden windows now began.

A little brisk grey slattern of a woman,
Pattering along in her loose-heel'd clogs,
Pusht the brass-barr'd door of a public house.
The spring went hard against her; hand and knee
Shoved their weak best. As the door poised ajar,
Hullabaloo of talking men burst out,
A pouring babble of inflamed palaver;
And overriding it and shouted down,
High words, jeering or passionate, broken like
Crests that leap and stumble in rushing water.
Just as the door went wide and she stept in,
'She cannot do it!' one was bawling out:
A glaring hulk of flesh with a bull's voice.
He finger'd with his neckerchief, and stretcht
His throat to ease the anger of dispute;
Then spat to put a full stop to the matter.
The little woman waited, with one hand
Propping the door, and smiled at the loud man.

They saw her then; and the sight was enough
To gag the speech of every drinker there:
The din fell down like something chopt off short.
Blank they all wheel'd towards her, with their mouths
Still gaping as though full of voiceless words.
She let the door slam to; and all at ease,
Amused, her smile wrinkling about her eyes,
Went forward: they made room for her quick enough.
Her chin just topt the counter; she gave in
Her bottle to the pot-boy, tuckt it back,
Full of bright tawny ale, under her arm,
Rapt down the coppers on the planisht zinc,
And turned: and no word spoken all the while.
The first voice, in that silent crowd, was hers,
Her light snickering laugh, as she stood there
Pausing, scanning the sawdust at her feet.
Then she switcht round and faced the positive man
Whose strong 'She cannot do it!' all still felt
Huskily shouting in their guilty ears.
'She can't, eh? She can't do it?'—Then she'd heard!
The man, inside his ruddy insolent flesh,
Had hoped she did not hear. His barrel chest
Gave a slight cringe, as though the glint of her eyes
Prickt him. But he stood up to her awkwardly bold,
One elbow on the counter, gripping his mug
Like a man holding on to a post for safety.

THE MAN. You can't do what 's not nature: nobody can.
THE WOMAN. And louts like you have nature in your pocket?
THE MAN. I don't say that——
THE WOMAN. If you kept saying naught,
No one would guess the fool you are.
SECOND MAN. Almost
My very words!
THE WOMAN. O you're the knowing man!
The spark among the cinders!
FIRST MAN. You can't fetch
A free man back, unless he wants to come.

THE WOMAN. Nay, I'll be bound he doesn't want to come!
THIRD MAN. And he won't come: he told me flat he wouldn't.
THE WOMAN. Are you there, too?
THIRD MAN. And if he does come back
It will be devilry brought him.
THE WOMAN. I shall bring him;—
To-night.
FIRST MAN. How will he come?
THE WOMAN. Running: unless
He 's broke his leg, and then he'll have to come
Crawling: but he will come.
FIRST MAN. How do you know
What he may choose to do, three counties off?
THE WOMAN. He choose?
THIRD MAN. You haven't got him on a lead.
THE WOMAN. Haven't I though!
SECOND MAN. That 's right; it 's what I said.
THE WOMAN. Ay, there are brains in your family.
FIRST MAN. You have
Some sort of pull on him, to draw him home?
THE WOMAN. You may say that: I have hold of his mind.
And I can slack it off or fetch it taut,
And make him dance a score of miles away
An answer to the least twangling thrum
I play on it. He thought he lurkt at last
Safely; and all the while, what has he been?
An eel on the end of a night-line; and it 's time
I haul'd him in. You'll see, to-night I'll land him.
THIRD MAN. Bragging 's a light job.
THE WOMAN. You daren't let me take
Your eyes in mine!—Haul, did I say? no need:
I give his mind a twitch, and up he comes
Tumbling home to me. Whatever work he 's at,
He drops the thing he holds like red-hot iron
And runs—runs till he falls down like a beast
Pole-axt, and grunts for breath; then up and on,
No matter does he know the road or not:

The strain I put on his mind will keep him going
Right as a homing-pigeon.
FIRST MAN. Devilry
I call it.
THE WOMAN. And you're welcome.
SECOND MAN. But the law
Should have a say here.
THE WOMAN. What, isn't he mine,
My own? There 's naught but what I please about it.
THIRD MAN. Why did you let him go?
THE WOMAN. To fetch him back!
For I enjoy this, mind. There 's many a one
Would think, to see me, 'There goes misery!
There 's a queer starveling for you!'—and I do
A thing that makes me like a saint in glory,
And the life seem to sound in me like a tune
You could never imagine: I can send power
Delighting out of me! O, the mere thought
Has made my blood go smarting in my veins,
Such a flame glowing along it!—And all the same
I'll pay him out for sidling off from me.
But I'll have supper first.

When she was gone,
Their talk could scarcely raise itself again
Above a grumble. But at last a cry
Sharp-pitcht came startling in from the street: at once
Their moody talk exploded into flare
Of swearing hubbub, like gunpowder dropt
On embers; mugs were clapt down, out they bolted
Rowdily jostling, eager for the event.
All down the street the folk throng'd out of doors,
But left a narrow track clear in the middle;
And there a man came running, a tall man
Running desperately and slowly, pounding
Like a machine, so evenly, so blindly;
And regularly his trotting body wagg'd.

Only one foot clatter'd upon the stones;
The other padded in his dogged stride:
The boot was gone, the sock hung frayed in shreds
About his ankle, the foot was blood and earth;
And never a limp, not the least flinch, to tell
The wounded pulp hit stone at every step.
His clothes were tatter'd and his rent skin showed,
Harrowed with thorns. His face was pale as putty,
Thrown far back; clots of drooping spittle foamed
On his moustache, and his hair hung in tails,
Mired with sweat; and sightless in their sockets
His eyeballs turned up white, as dull as pebbles.
Evenly and doggedly he trotted,
And as he went he moaned. Then out of sight
Round a corner he swerved, and out of hearing.

'The law should have a say to that, by God!'

IN THE DUNES

BRIGHT-MINDED were they both, the boy and girl;
Mirror'd in steel the world gleamed on their lives.
But each took now only the other's brightness,
Each burnisht mind turned wholly to its fellow;
While in between, and far into lucid depths,
Their love burnt white, unwavering poise of flame
Infinitely reflected back and forth.

They were among the dunes: valleys of sand,
And little alps of sand scarpt clean and sheer,
Whose fretting cliffs the wind still quarried down
To banks that slurred in landslide at a step.
The air was gentle, but as white as rime
With sea-fret, that came vapouring inland
Placidly and slowly on a warm breeze,—
Clinging along the ground, and smelling keen
As camphor. Light was shadowless and blancht
Dissolved in it; unless, far out at sea,

A tarnisht glare lay like a bar of brass,
The gleam of hidden sunshine, when the fog
Rifted and closed again. The tide was in;
It swayed a lazy pulse along the beach,
And drew the pebbles down purring and clucking
In shallow lapse of ripples—the noise stole
About the dunes soft as the stroking of silk.

They loiter'd, with the warm mist blank around them.

SHE. A stranger would be lost now. It's all one,
Right road or wrong road: the white fog gives way
And closes in behind, and you seem still
In the same place whichever way you go.
HE. All the better for idling: no world left
But where we are, and we need none.
SHE. None left
But an old quiet sea murmuring somewhere,
Deserted by the other creatures.
HE. Still
Thinking aloud of those courageous days
When there was stubborn land to quarrel with.
SHE. We must belong to the sea then; or why else
Should we stay hiding in its memory—
This whispering cloud of salty moist sea-smell—
When all the world beside has slipt away?
HE. When I'm inland, and I dream of the sea,
It always is a thing that comes to claim me;
Or, as the other night, I am its captive.
SHE. Drown'd, were you?
HE. No; walking upon the water
A good league from the land: the prisoner
Of some fierce tribe I might have been, set free
To watch the onslaught on his native town.
A high wind clamour'd there through bright blue weather,
And on the flashing tide I paced, the foam
And rocking sunshine firm to tread as marble.

The waves went charging by me like crazed troops
Fanatic to die fighting, and the cliffs
Flung them, and their brothers trampled them;
For the wind whoopt them on, and giant spray
Stood up like menacing priests in snowy gowns
And prophesied the conquest of the land.
Then I was swimming: I had slipt my guard,
And made off in the press towards the land.
Like prairie-herds thundering head-down
The senseless charge swept on: no heed for me,
Though the shouting gale that sat the high-curv'd crests
Pulled at their spindrift manes and knee'd their withers,
But could not turn them; and I won to shore,
And held as close to the rocks as if I'd been
Crucified to them. Then they saw my escape,
The waters; then they leapt upon me raging,
And pouring down on me to scour me off,
They became beasts: at ankle, hip, and shoulder
Hands wrencht with sinewy baboon fingers, mouths
Worried and tugg'd like wolves, the paws of bears
Cufft every sense in me stupid, rugged tails
Of alligators clubb'd me; thick and lithe
Bodies like snakes beneath me prized: I felt them
Tighten and sleek and swell and shrug against me.
But I clung on, and clamber'd safely away.

SHE. High seas and shining wind! This was a game
Your brain was playing. I have dreamt of music
Capturing me; I did not listen to it,
My mind past into sound like heaven's delight:
Your dream of sunlit waves and cloudless gale
Was nothing worse. But if you had been taken
By calm sea crooning to itself in mist,
You would have dreamt a sea-spell to be feared.

HE. The sea means most when it is like to-day,
In hiding and very quiet?—Yes; it would be
Such a veil'd sea as this first gave the pattern
To that old tale I spoke of.

SHE. Read it me.
It 's warm enough to linger here awhile.
HE. 'There was a wicked emperor in Rome;
And when his body slept, his wickedness
Was waking still, and moved about his sleep
In likeness of the things his senses knew.
Sometimes a horse it would be, that would look
Winking upon him with old criminal eyes;
Or a great toad, licking the wither'd smile
Of rusty lips that rimm'd the flattish face
With a red tongue like a man's, dripping with pleasure;
And men and women frantic with desire
To be strange in sin, and all hopelessly frantic,
Were usual visitors. Or it might be
He saw a mountain towering in its furs
Of forest and bright cape of folded snow;
And, staring on it, suddenly to his eyes
The mountain turned obscene, a squatted hunch,
Bald hardy pate and fell of brutish hair,
Brooding some impossible lickerish greed.
This was the wicked emperor's punishment.
Awake, he was his own insatiate self;
Asleep, the whole world came and lookt at him
Wickedly: wickedness would not let him be.
'And once he dreamt he saw an ancient man
With sorrowful shaggy face, laboriously
Footing towards him, clad in restless grey;
Up out of a grey fume of mist he trudged,
And his clothes hung on him like sopping things.
And like a fisherman who hauls a seine
With shoulders roped, plodding up the loose beach,
The stooping old man came, and after him
He lugg'd a trailing heaviness of broad
Swaying enormous water, that rebelled
Behind him, and in whiten'd fury swashring
Plunged like a netted beast. It was the sea,
The ancient ghost of the sea, come with his toil

Of everlasting water to confer
With him whose life dragg'd after it loads of lust.
The ghost stood panting; noise of broken waves
Shouted past him: a smell like stale salt weed
Came from his sloven clothes of tatter'd foam,
And caught the emperor's disgusted throat.
He kept both arms back to one shoulder crookt
To clutch his tightest on the rope, and leant
In forward strain against the bellowing
Ceaseless revolt of vast unwilling sea;
And ridged along his hands there was a gleam
Of silver and green scale, and on his cheeks
The skin was like the belly of a fish,
Glistering white and moist; and clotted spume
Made him his drooping rags of beard. The dream
Bowed to the emperor, and as he bowed
His eyes lookt up and leered; and instantly
The emperor knew the secret of the sea.
'Suppose a man driven into his trade,
Like a wedge hammer'd to the butt and held
By the tough timber's pinch—one of the tools
His ruthless country must by thousands ply
To split and frame its fortune as it needs:
Suppose the helpless fasten'd man, his life
(All but imagination) fixt in work
And still forced deeper into duty, lets
His useless mind fly abroad in pleasures,
Fly in delights; the firmer he is gript,
The more his fancy takes the scope of frenzy;
Till his brain glows a gaiety of sin
His graspt incapable life can only love
In notions of anguishing desire. Just so
It was with this old spectre of the sea:
Bound in an endless task, spending his tides
Still in the great purpose of all the world;
No will allowed him but to thrust and pull
Like engine strokes his weight of ocean water,

Grinding the coasts of the earth with waves, to pile
New shingle on worn beaches otherwhere;
And all to him mere blank and senseless toil,
No use, no meaning; till the sea at last
Out of the ages of his slavery
Imagined his escaping will, in dreams
Of exquisitely speculated sin,
Immense and accurate abomination,
The quintessential wickedness that could
Finally satisfy lust, even the sea's.
But all was mood and impotence; and now
He came, poorly consoling his despair,
To lend the emperor's mind the darling splendour
Of his invention; to watch it in the act,
Radiant, dilating, though in another;
Its passion welling liberal as the sun
Utters his flame, but shapely in delight
And crystalline as vapour caught by frost:
The one perfectly calculated sin
Performed at last, no longer secret vision.
'But nothing could be done of this: no words
Could pass, no understanding. There they stayed
Fixt in a quivering gaze while yearning ached
In both like perishing, the dream to teach,
The dreamer to be taught. Still the sea's eyes
Burn'd at the emperor; the man knew in them
That science blazing which his heart so long
Had of his brain implored; the Perfect Sin
Was there, beseeching to be known and loved.
He had a thundering vision of himself
Shuddering and grinning, sighing and clenching,
In a torment of bliss; and like pufft flame
The glimpse went out; and there the staring sea
Croucht dumb and baffled; the green rage of his eyes
Grew to a glaring flood of icy fire,
Drowning the man in horrible flaming water;
And vast malignant green roar'd over him

Till all was deaf and blind.
'The emperor woke;—
To labour his old dull routine of evil,
And drudge in habits of familiar sin.'
SHE. This is just havering. My old peevish aunt
Is guinea-gold with jaundice, and her sight
Stains the whole world about her dismal yellow;
Your emperor was like that. There 's no real evil.
HE. Pah! How the sea-fret thickens!
SHE. And the chill
Now coming through it!
HE. Choking thick! It seems
To deafen now as well as blind.
SHE. Why, listen!
Listen! You cannot hear the least faint noise
Come from the sea.
HE. Not a breeze whispering,
And yet this chill comes pushing through the air!
SHE. And the mist crowding on us: look at it smoking
In from the sea over the ridge of dunes.
I wish I heard the sea.
HE. If we moved now,
I think we'ld have to make a work of it
Like breast-high wading, such a press of fog
Has muster'd round us.
SHE. But no water could
Weigh so shuddering cold as this white darkness.
The air 's as grave as death: and reeks!
HE. O, foul!
Like all the sea's decay breathing on us!
SHE. And still no noise! What has come to the sea
To fall in such a soundless spell? The bay,
When all the weather 's fast in summer drowse,
Still keeps a stir of little combing waves,
Toy surf thudding along the level sand
In pausing midget breakers, sounding like
Round after round of gun-fire miles away.

But silent now as frost!

HE. And a strange thing
That it was all at once, as instantly
As pouncing terror, every noise of water
Froze in the air.

SHE. You'ld think the sea were dead.

HE. The waters of the sea have died.

SHE. And this
Quiet coiling cold sea-smoke might be
The nature of the putrid underdepths
Come ghostly forth, leaving the waters stricken.

HE. Stifling now! The harsh cloud laps about us
Almost blindfolding.

SHE. There 's a living thing
Coming up from the water! I can feel
A power like a spirit making towards us!

HE. I hoped you could not feel it.

SHE. I was not sure.
Now it is near, and dreadful.

HE. Loathing us
With foul desire, worse than the reeking chill
It casts upon the air!

SHE. The quivering force
Peals like a noiseless ringing in my brain,
Searching for something it can master there.

HE. It is behind that nearest mound of dunes,
Intent on us, like rage.

SHE. Will it find us?—
It must not look at us!

HE. It is held back;
It comes no nearer, for all its bitter longing:
As if it were a tether'd thing.

SHE. Now surely
Its striving towards us faints!—It has let go!
The grasp failed on my heart and slipt off like
The clutch of dying malice: I am free now!

HE. And breath comes sweet again; the brackish dank

Flies off in phantom, and an earthly warmth
Blesses the air, and tastes as kind as milk.

SHE. And hark! The silence rustled! Sure I heard
The waters sighing as their icy trance
Rouses along the shore.

HE. And hark again!
A little wave came stumbling up the sand.

THE SIX MEN OF CALAIS

EUSTACHE SAINT-PIERRE, *the Mayor*.
JACQUES DE WISSANT
PIERRE DE WISSANT
JEAN D'AIRE
JEAN DE FIENNES
ANDRIEU D'ANDRES

EUSTACHE SAINT-PIERRE

Have done, Jean de Fiennes: loosen her arms!
Leave go, you wench! Do you want him blubbering?
Death! if there 's any good thing to be done
The women put their meddling in and spoil it.

JEAN DE FIENNES

She 's my sweetheart.

EUSTACHE SAINT-PIERRE

You should have thought of that:
We can't go snivelling to the English camp.—
Stand back, you folks! And hold your howling, do!
No need for you to tell the grinning English
We're on the road.—Now form up, two and two:
I will go first with old Andrieu d'Andres,
Then the two brothers, Jacques and Pierre de Wissant,
Last the two Jeans, d'Aire and de Fiennes.
So: here 's some kind of order. Now, sirs, tramp,
Tramp and look steady: and hold your halters up,
Else if you trip on them you'll jerk your necks
Before the time.—The devil bite these people!

Gangway, there, for the Lord's sake! My bare feet
Ache on the stones and my legs are shuddering
In this cold wind.—Step along briskly, now:
Let 's get outside this caterwauling town;
I'ld liefer far be hanged than cried upon.

JACQUES DE WISSANT

You'll be hanged soon enough: the scaffold 's ready.
I watcht them from my window framing it.

ANDRIEU D'ANDRES

Much to be said for a formal mind, Saint-Pierre.
Here am I now, chanting over and over
Inside my head like a child with a nursery rhyme,
'This can't be me, and by God, it is, it's me!'
And wondering what a hanging may be like:
And all the trouble for you is, how to make
Six chilly men with only shirts to wear
Walk like a procession.

EUSTACHE SAINT-PIERRE

You're out of step.

ANDRIEU D'ANDRES

Ay, we must keep in step! That 's the great thing
For men who are mightily afraid they'll feel
The swooping fear of death land on their shoulders.

PIERRE DE WISSANT

Speak for yourself: I think nothing of death.

JACQUES DE WISSANT

No; you're too busy play-acting to think.

PIERRE DE WISSANT

Is it play-acting that this halter makes me
A prouder man than a king's jewel could?

JACQUES DE WISSANT

O keep all that for your speech to the king of England.

EUSTACHE SAINT-PIERRE

His speech? I'm spokesman here, mind; I'm the Mayor.

PIERRE DE WISSANT

Citizens of Calais, weep not for us.
Enough for us we save you; you shall see,
Once we are past this little cloud of death,
Our names are launcht on such a towering flight
The sun goes not so high.

EUSTACHE SAINT-PIERRE

Come on, come on.
What death is I don't know; but a cold wind
Lifting my shirt and trifling round my belly
I'm knowing now too well.

JEAN D'AIRE

To have us come
Half-naked, with halter'd necks! These barbarous English!

JACQUES DE WISSANT

Good hangmen, though.

ANDRIEU D'ANDRES

Yes, queer how sharp a score
Small things will make on the mind of a dying man.
This creeping of the wind along my skin,
Like icy moths pushing the hairs aside—
It might be diamond cutting a mark on glass,
I note it so: and vastly more somehow
It means to note this now, even than to be
Marvelling how I got my mind made up—
Or why—to let an English hangman choke me.

JEAN D'AIRE

Half-naked, with halter'd necks! Barbarous people!

EUSTACHE SAINT-PIERRE

Look out, behind! The street 's a patch of muck.

ANDRIEU D'ANDRES

Ah, you remind me: they are still mine down there,
Those feet—and what a long way down they are,
Picking their steps so gingerly! I'm sure

That 's not my doing: myself, I should not bother
To go so nicely on my way to be hanged,
But barefoot stamp ahead as if I were shod.

JACQUES DE WISSANT

Old Andrieu will be talking. The wise man
Is Fiennes: he knows there 's nothing to be said,
And keeps his mouth shut.

EUSTACHE SAINT-PIERRE

Ay, there was a girl;
I had to pull him from her.

ANDRIEU D'ANDRES

O let him go!
Nothing should ever get the better of love!
Saint-Pierre, can you not let him go?

EUSTACHE SAINT-PIERRE

Too late.

JEAN DE FIENNES

Too late?—Ay, too late I knew she was mine.

ANDRIEU D'ANDRES

The worst thing yet!—Pierre 's gone very quiet.

JACQUES DE WISSANT

Yes, the play-actor finding the play real.

PIERRE DE WISSANT

I am ashamed.

EUSTACHE SAINT-PIERRE

What 's that? Ashamed? And cheeks
Grey as my beard!—Now dear God send we have
No trouble with the fellow!

PIERRE DE WISSANT

I'm going to spew.

ANDRIEU D'ANDRES

Good lad! Why not?

JACQUES DE WISSANT

For God's sake mind my legs.—

He has no business here! It was all wrong
To take the young fool!

ANDRIEU D'ANDRES

Nonsense: he 's as hearty
As any of us now.—But you know, Pierre,
That was a nobler stuff than all your speeches.

JACQUES DE WISSANT

Who 's splashing now?—Why, look at the Mayor
Trampling the puddles dry like a man blindfolded!

ANDRIEU D'ANDRES

There 's some remarkable study going on
Behind that frown, Saint-Pierre: what are you lost in?

EUSTACHE SAINT-PIERRE

Trying to make out what the deuce to say
To the English king! I talk like a simpleton
Unless I have my speech square in my head.

JACQUES DE WISSANT

No pleading with the beast! I'll give you all
The speech you want: tell him to go to hell.

EUSTACHE SAINT-PIERRE

I'll sting him, if you'll hold your tongue a little.

JEAN D'AIRE

To have us come half-naked, with halter'd necks!
Barbarous! These barbarous English!

ASMODEUS IN EGYPT

STUPID on the sand, like a stoned bird,
With his limp wings languishing, lay Asmodeus;
The vast dazzling grey of desert ground
Like a speck took the size of the sprawling spirit.
A brindled locust, when its brittle membranes
Flames of the bonfires the brass-beating farmers
Kindle, have caught and crippled with shrivelling:
Such a lame locust the demon lay.

And such a scorching, that sent him tumbling,
Ecbatan to Egypt, in ungovernable flight,
Such a withering and blasting, till his blunders ended
In a stunning fall furrowing the sand,
Such bitter passion as a burnt thing passes through—
The smell of the smoke of smouldering fish:
Suffocating frenzy to the sensitive fiend,
Ransacking agony and ruin like flame.

But long time lying in the sunlight of Egypt
And odourless air of the empty place,
From the wreck of his members and his reeking memory
The drench of the poison was purified, and past.
Shuddering out of senselessness the swoon'd life crept;
But lamentable life now, for all it was cleansed:
His grief still a story astonishing his mind.

'I saw them coming, I saw the young men
Rejoicing in their journey, and jolly with their dog,
I sitting on the roof above Sara's room.
I knew not their minds, they were nothing to me:
Handsome young men, in the honey-yellow light,
With Median evening mingled in their hair,
Making pelt for pebbles the pretty shock dog.
I lookt at their beauty and boasted lazily:
Seven such fine fellows have these fingers strangled,
Seven bride-grooms lie buried in graves,
Seven such glitterers are secrets in the garden;
No housing for you here, you handsome young men!

'But were they wizards, that my wantoning mood,
Chattering within me, could challenge like a voice?
Did a magical hearing quiver in their minds,
As through to them my thought thrill'd along the light?
For they came marching in. They made a marriage.
And I knew nothing, I knew not their mastery;
Nothing I reckoned but the rage in me again
To deal like a demon with the flesh that dared
Come lusting for the slenderness of my delight, my Sara.
So I laught and I waited; I lookt through the window,

And in the dark garden lo! the digging of a grave:
Raguel making ready where to roll the morning corpse,
Like a sensible father, seven times instructed.
Ay, old sir, said I, more strangling to be done,
More mould to be stampt down before the market stirs!
But I knew nothing: not when the new bridegroom,
My frightened Sara faltering before him,
Brought in his nastiness, nothing I knew;
Not even when he pickt from out his fulsome pocket
His filthy handful of offal of a fish,
And the brown morsel in the brazier's midmost,
With a little prim smile, prest well upon the coals,
I knew not his mastery, I rankling for his murder.
'Ah! then, then I knew—nay, then I knew nothing
But anguish and anguish through me like lightning,
And a leap aloft like letting fly a catapult,
And the stink after me up to the stars;
Then the long crazy glide of me, crumpled and corroded,
In swerves and somersaults spinning to the ground.
'O my Master! O manifold Energy
Hallowed in Hell! Holy one, Beelzebub,
Prince the most popular of power on earth!
Innumerable nature, the nation of the flies,
But one demonic majesty, one multiplying fiend!
Curse me my vanity, come with a vengeance
Of destruction swarming on the strength of my folly!
Commander and unmaker of all made things,
Lord of the flesh, loosening it into flight
Of vanishing vapour, invisible pestilence:
Putrefy my folly like liquescent flesh,
And let it go wandering in ghost about the world!
Make ministers of rottenness to feed in my mind:
Be a season of flies there, and my sore folly
A festering beast in it! Be great in me, Beelzebub!
Eat up my pleasure in my one precious sense,
Consume my yearning for a lust beyond it,
Rid me of the dreams that enchanted the darkness

Solomon sealed me in, with the sea's weight over:
Devour the vile dreams that could infect a fiend
With fanatic zeal of desire impossible—
Sensuous pleasure craving more sense to please,
A demon's mind living in that ignominy of men,
Imagination! But Master, my Beelzebub,
Make thy Asmodeus once more pure breath
Of intellectual being, the boundless simplicity
Of spirit serene above sense and feeling,
Incuriously perfect in pleasureless knowledge.
'For with good words God gave me dismissal;
Yet crookedly, I doubt, and craftily kind:
"Ay, have thou for holiday awhile my earth;
Scandalize to thy liking there, be scurrile all thou canst,
Naught thou wilt devise but like virtue will serve me:
Nothing on my earth may move in other scope.
But earth must be in thee, lest thou strain my exquisite
Articulate contrivance, intruding all unearthly.
Thou must learn to go grossly in negotiating sense,
And mix the strange appetite of mortal perceiving
With spirit's speculation. But a single sense
Shall be thy passport of pleasure and pain:
Take thy choice, and I will touch thee with it!'
'I studied; and the sense of purest pleasure,
The least intelligent, to life of a spirit
Faculty most foreign and remotest amusement,
I chose, I assumed—man's absolute sense:
And for sojourn on earth became a spirit that could smell.
'Master, I was marvellous! I loved myself!
And the piercing surprisals of pleasure in my sense
I worshipt—a wild thing, wandering continually
In solitary ravishment, smelling the earth:
Herbage on the hills, in the hedges lilies,
Warm winds at sea, spices in the desert,
Peaks icily sheathed, shadowing pines at noon:
No counting the delights of my lonely flying
Through the fragrance of the earth—the fibres of a spirit

In delicious stress of the sense of a man,
Tremulous with subtly traversing pulses.
'Ah, but the terror, the tearing amazement,
The dividing of life, the lurch and whirl
Of giddy disgust, the goading for leagues—
Ah, the filthy anguish of stinking places!
'But nothing of that. One notable joy
I found and kept: from cruising daylong
In sunshine odours, and under the stars
Enquiring for scents cool hours entice,
Always at morning I made towards Lebanon,
To drink where a dark cleft drips, confiding
Its secret water (a well as black
And still as the mind of a stunn'd man)
To a noiseless intent conspiracy of cedars.
But the chasm to me, coming with dawn
Smouldering after me, crystalline smell
Of living rock-water would welcoming send—
Message sweeter to meet than sweetness,
Freshening even the mountain morning—
And wash me keen for the morrow's worship.
'But once strange savour seized me returning,
And far off the fright of it stung like fire:
A luxury of fragrance fuming and glowing
Into my mind, tormenting sweetness,
Corrupting the limpid Lebanon twilight.
My spirit, expecting purity of water,
Cringed in the air; and there crept through the scent
My loathing, the musty handling of men.
I fled, and my thirst refrained three dawns.
But each day reluctantly longer and nearer
To hover, the dizzying odour drew me:
Till I drank the well—I drained the wine
Crafty King Solomon for a bait to catch me,
Stealing my treasure of water, had stored in it.
Drunk and manacled, down to Solomon
The ruffians carted me for him to question.

But I held my tongue. Like a hound he had me
Still at his heels, standing or following,
His humble animal—Hell's Asmodeus!—
But answering nothing: though I knew well
To loose the riddle his wisdom writhed in,
And give him his temple of great wrought stone
No metal had toucht, mallet or chisel.
I knew, from my nice exploring for novelty
Fragrantly growing in highland ground,
The workman he wanted—the small fierce worm,
Shamir, that rasps rock for his food,
With engraving tongue licking it glassy,
Granite and basalt burnishing and grooving.
But when Solomon perceived I would not speak,
He thrust me in a jar and throttled the mouth of it
With a mystical emerald he moulded like wax,
And wrote his name and anger across it,
And put the sea for a sentry over me.
'Yet crafty King Solomon, cunning fiend-trapper,
Guesst not my punishment in the pit of the sea.
He found me a fiend with that folly trifling
Men call pleasure—playing with a sense,
And making much of its amusing ecstasy:
I once the dignity of a demon's intelligence,
Undelighted, undiscursive, instantaneously expatiating.
Did I grieve for my spirit so long degraded
In the small rapture of a sense's greed:
Ay, now through its greed degraded to the grave
Of all event but ineffectual shame?
Or think you I longed for my darling loss,
Remembering noon meadows, morning on Lebanon,
Salt sea-beaches—all the sweet breathing earth:
Now an abject sealed for centuries of nonentity,
In the bottom of existence buried by a man?—
Nay, for a fiend infected he buried me,
Infected by the spectacle of Solomon's pleasure:
Dreams were shut in with me; when he drowned my sepulchre

I was closeted with phantoms. A cloud full of thunder
Superbly persuades the mass of a mountain
To imitate the passion electric above it,
Disturbing the sleep of its inmost stone
To thrill like vapour with vehemence unuttered:
So Solomon's happiness with hidden dark fire
Had charged my being; and it broke forth imagining
Continual lightning of dazzling lust,
Soon as I was fast in my senseless solitude.
My black abysm became a den of dreams;
I was no cramp in the sea's depth sunk,
But a world of voluble fury of fantasy,
Wheeling apparition of impossible pleasure,
Passage so swift of spectres adorable
In dancing procession, alluring courtesy,
I could take no features of their flying faces.
A globe of incapable glorying desire
My spirit invented in the senseless sea;
And I its creator like a crazy god
Doating on the inscrutable thing he has done.
'Then the spell broke and the seal burst open,
Solomon's malignity at the last perishing.
The black water quaked, the blind brute places
Roared with my freedom, and my rage triumphantly
Thundering up to be again a demon.
As if the ground of the sea broke, spouting with fire,
And the boiling of the gulf in one grand bubble
Exclaimed its smoke and steam to the air:
So swirling I arose, ravenous to please
My visionary appetite and vastly enjoy
Solomon's delight, a lover of women
Roaming the nations in innumerable marriages.
My scrutinizing quest quarter'd the earth
For my first feasting of my dream's desire;
And passing over Ecbatan the power possesst me
That Solomon lavisht his life to worship.
A Median girl on a marketing errand

Fixt in me her loveliness, and fetcht me circling
Down from the height of my spying to adore her:
As if a meteor should fall from its fiery curve,
Suddenly sloping the splendour of its mission
To fly as a pigeon round loiterers' shoulders.
Invisibly obsequious I followed my Sara
Moving a spectre of music in front of me:
Music divined before hearing can feel it,
Promising the beauty my dream proposed,
And now to be loved and known and enjoyed!
'And still no delight! Still deluded agonizing,
Worse than my dreams now, would not let me go!
I knew of beauty and a bliss calling me
To spend my life on it, spirit and sense:
It was there, the wonder, it was waiting for me there;
But beyond me, beyond me! Detestably useless
My one wretched sense—all that idiot ranging
In pleasures sweet earth bestowed so easily,
That simple alacrity, my life of fragrance!
There was Sara to be loved: and I could not love her!
No beauty for me, where I knew beauty was:
No meaning for me where marvellous meaning
I knew awaited worshipping sense.
In ravishing torture that took me voluptuously,
My speculating spirit burnt about her
In fiction of the bliss I could not find;
But always recoiled in baffled concupiscence,
Mere imbecile lust, longing for sense
That could understand that symbol of love,
My inconceivably lovely Sara.
Ay, much that my misery of sense would suffer
Faithfully the odour of female flesh—
Nay, like it at last! But at least this
I would not bear—bridegrooms libidinous
With senses impudently able before me,
The delighted loving of lusty young men!
But Sara was not loved: my strangling was their marriage.

'All ended now! And my worthless sense
Flung with disgusting injury grovelling
Back to stale things at the bidding of a stench.
Those conjurers came; they caught me unaware
With their filthy mischief; and nothing fortunate
Remains on earth, now they have made me
Abandon my anguish, my beauty's phantom,
My love of unimaginable love, my Sara.
'But take me out of earth! Take from my nature
Sense and the mankind curse of pleasure,
The craving of sense; and my crippled speculation
Restore to a fiend's unfeeling sanity
Of lucidly spacious spiritual knowledge
That knows no desire, for beyond it nothing is.
Beelzebub, my lord! Let me live no more
In that glamour of men, that gleaming superstition,
Beauty, so shiftily brightening and shaping
The clouds of sense that enclose and bemuse
Man's wistful mind—and my mind, Beelzebub!
The mind of thy demon! O make me be done with it!
Out of this earth of appetite desiring,
Beauty pretending, fantasy forging,
Take me, and give me reality again:
Once more the endless unmoved moment
Of pure reality, a spirit's experience
Perfectly circular, icily secure:
The infinite of all things for ever present
In one calm personal point of knowledge,
Itself to all things infinitely known.'
So prayed the fiend to his pestilent master:
Who knows how answered?—But if, of an evening,
In a thicketted place where thrushes and primroses
Celebrate spring, or in summer morning
When burnet-roses sweeten sea-breezes,
And the space of the dunes blows honey and spice,
You feel a spirit has fled before you:

It may be Asmodeus was modestly there
Smelling his solace; but swift to shy
Continents away, if a man comes near.

HAM AND EGGS

A SKY like a dirty canvas tilt
Close on the earth hangs weighing down,
Where water heavy with inland silt
And filth of many a factory town,
Brown river mingling with drab sea,
Laps on the grey sand lazily:
The tide far out on the flat shore,
Slack sea and current come to terms.
A pier of a quarter mile or more,
On stilted footing splayed out wide—
Like a giant kind of those hated worms
With a fringe of legs on either side—
Steps wading through the soft mud-banks
On a hundred iron spindle-shanks
To the fairway where the ferries ply.
The listed boats, nigh toppling
With the press at the gangways, begin to bring
The Saturday-afternoon parade,
With a few free hours and wages paid,
Jostling ashore on its way to buy
Some hasty pleasure. It throngs the pier
And mobs the turnstiles, crammed as tight
As bolting fish shoaled in a weir;
Then out through the clicking brasswork jets,
Twitching its rumpled jackets aright,
And a dozen ways the current sets,
Everyone for his fancy bound:
Dancing, switchback, giddy-go-round,
Or to buy good luck at the gypsies' tent,
Or to muse, with a lordly blank content,

Upon three mangy slouching bears
In the dank bucket of their pound,
Padding the round they've padded for years.

But most of the holiday troops decide
For the coastwise pathway. On one side
They have, as they take their sauntering ways,
An endless reach of shallow tide;
And sunlight filtering through fawn haze
Draws streaks and knots of glistering pale
Slippery lustre of mother-of-pearl
On the paved expanse of airless sea:
Like the vagaries of loop and curl,
The faint bright varnish aimlessly
Trackt on a flagg'd walk by a snail.
But on the left side the path goes
Past tumble-down and shabby rows
Of sheds and booths and old marquees,
For dealing in stale gaieties:
Where a giggling crowd for a penny stares
At an oily nigger saying his prayers;
Or in the clanging shooting-stalls
They fire skew rifles at little balls
Jumping about on water jets;
Or cheer their glee when a girl upsets
Head-over-heels at end of her ride
Down the slope of the taut wire, slung
For the trolley to race its headlong glide,
She like a sack on her pull'd arms hung.

But eating-shops are commonest;
And whether there be a special zest
In ham and eggs, their only fare,
Or some more potent trade thrive there,
These flourish more than all the rest.
Frowsy within, dingy without;
But mouldy finery litter'd about

On mantel-piece and table-top—
Knacks on fancy mats, and a crop
Of tufted grass dyed yellow and pink,
Busts of the King, and glass hand-bells—
With plush-framed panels of glued sea-shells
Pinn'd to the walls, seem meant to make
The munching customer rather think
He eats in a parlour than a shop.
At every door a girl, to take
Her daily gossip, lolls at ease,
Painted to make a parson blink,
And scented to make a foxhound sneeze.
Soon, when the loitering crowds begin,
With female clamour the air will shake,
Harsh as the sound of beaten tin,
Announcing tea and plates of fry;
Lest heedless hunger ramble by
And lust for ham should not awake.
Let a young man one instant give
Notice to these fierce syllables,
A wench will have him by the sleeve,
Whisper seriously in his ear,
And deftly show her petticoat frills.

But there is no trade yet come near.
The girls, posted to draw it in,
Idle awhile, and akimbo lean
Against the jambs of the doors, and throw
Cheerful scandalous banter about
In a reedy metallic effortless shout;
Or vacantly watch the steamships go,
That forth into empty oceans glide
Like gods on placid grand affairs,
No more aware they coast beside
Small gazes at the water's edge
Than any thoughtful traveller cares
For ants and beetles in the hedge.

The girl, though, of the meanest shanty there,
Was late to lounge on duty, and the shop
Open'd without her its crazy blister'd door
Wide and inviting to the table laid.
Already news of frying ham crept out
Hissing and savoury rank, and a slut bustled
In and out of the lean-to den at back
That served as kitchen. Even the music now
Struck up a jaunty racket: this was a neat
Black-drest black-bonneted meagre upright old lady,
With grey shawl tight across her shoulders scrimpt,
Sitting, straight as a rod and iron-stiff,
Her back towards the door. (' 'Tisn't your face
I'm hiring,' she'd been told; 'turn on the tunes
And keep your face turned off: mind that.') She held
The rigid corner of her skinny knees
As fixt as limbs fetter'd together; and straight
As her spine was, her head was always leant
A little sideways, and one shoulder shrugged
Immovably up to it; even her elbows prest
Firm on her waist as they'd been lasht there close;
But nimble were her wrists and spry her fingers,
Never a moment flagging in their chase
Of imbecile gaiety. To and fro her hands
Went jangling wolfish chords and tinkling out
Silly flourishing airs; while she herself,
Fast in her stiff black trance, her tilted head
Held up in an unchanging muse to stare
Six inches over the piano-top at nothing,
Took from her wiry busily-trifling hands
Not so much as a shiver.
A door bounced
Clattering open beside her at the back;
It gave upon a flight of upward stairs.
The wench came flurrying in and slammed it to:
A plump pert rattling merry-hearted thing,
Bright with her own good fortune; and that was,

To be alive. She skipt across and laid
Firm hold on the old lady's bony shoulders
And shook her stubborn pose; but the gay hands
Went playing on. So the wench screwed her round;
Those faithfully frivolous hands were only stopt
When the lean body they were jointed to,
But hardly seemed belonging to, was slued
Right from the key-board; then they lay in her lap
And twitched uneasy fingers, as a dog
That lately hunted sleeps with jerking paws.

THE WENCH. The bone of you!—Remind me, the next time
I tickle in the small of my back, to take
Your shoulder-blade for a scratching-post.—Come round,
Bombasine!—I'd to hurry; I was kept.
Look me over and tell me, is my face
Done all to rights?—What 's to do, Missis Eyes?
Whatever 's the scare about? It 's only paint.
THE OLD LADY. You ought to be ashamed.
THE WENCH. The same to you.
THE OLD LADY. A painted face disgusts me.
THE WENCH. That 's because
You couldn't paint your dry old prune of a face,
Not if you were a house-painter.—Have sense,
And don't be a cross-patch: tell me how I look.
THE OLD LADY. How should you look? You look like what you are.
THE WENCH. You don't: you look respectable.
THE OLD LADY. You know
I've got to be here.
THE WENCH. And you know I want to.
We can cry quits.
THE OLD LADY. Oh, but my dear, my dear,
If I could help myself, I would help you.
THE WENCH. It would be somebody else if it wasn't me:
I said, have sense.
THE OLD LADY. Will you never have sense

How this painting your face and dressing up
Makes your life, that should be your very own,
Common as open ground?—When workmen cut
A short way to their jobs over a field,
It 's very soon the grass is trodden dirt.
THE WENCH. You skeleton! Calling me dirt! And who
Keeps the procession brisk with rousing tunes?
THE OLD LADY. No need for that taunt: hot and bitter to me
As scalding poison to be doing this.
THE WENCH. O look! Tribes already!—While we're in talk
Good money 's slipping past us, running to waste.
Round you go and vamp us a spanking piece.

A slap and a twisting push left the old lady
Instantly stiffen'd into her posture again,
Her thin back turned severe against the door
With canted head and slightly lifted gaze,
And arms tuckt in; her diligent weaving hands
Might never have paused: back in their dainty pace
Off tript her fingers impudently jingling
Tinsel music to brighten the seduction
The wench was hoarsely busy with outside,
Snatching at likely passengers and shrugged
Laughingly off a dozen times before
She found her game. A young man, cap awry
To show his grease-lickt forelock, let her grasp
Stay a few seconds on his arm, and felt
Somehow a vague and pleased importance from it.

She knows him hers before he is sure
Himself what his mind is; and towards the door
She has him dragged, and is whispering,
Hugging him down, some cockering thing.
The delicate bloom of her bared arm greeting
His skin with its fine warm youth, her scent,
Her side against him, her merriment,
Set his heart dizzily beating

Burning blood through every vein;
And, startling along his nerves, delight
Flashes trembling into his brain.
Flesh clothes his spirit in flame star-white
One lightning moment—flame of the fire
That carries splendour of worlds like flakes
Of darkening slag; and swift as it came
The brightness dulls—a moment slakes
Flesh that wrapt him in thrilling flame
To flesh that is earth and mere desire.
Now it is easy work, and she
May bend as she likes his waxen will;
He yields, but he goes sulkily,
And makes her seem to hale him still.

THE WENCH. Come along, innocent.
THE YOUTH. I'm not innocent.
THE WENCH. You won't be so stand-offish after tea.
THE YOUTH. I don't want any tea.
THE WENCH. You'll want plenty
Once you have bitten into our ham.
THE YOUTH. I don't
Fancy your fry.
THE WENCH. Are you in dread of thirst?
THE YOUTH. Ay, in a teashop.
THE WENCH. You wait till you sniff
The tea I'll brew you, and see if you don't wish
You'd shipwreckt in the tropics and brought home
The thirst of it undamaged. And the thing is,
What 's cooking in the kitchen now is just
The image of that thirst, the spitting image.
THE YOUTH. Tea 's not my style.
THE WENCH. O, I can size you up.—
How 's that?
THE YOUTH. Whatever have you put in it?
THE WENCH. Look in the milk-jug.
THE YOUTH. Whisky!

THE WENCH. You didn't think
To meet your old friend here!—Now for the fry:
Chew it up well and get the good of it!
THE YOUTH. By God! The good you call it! Brim me my cup,
Sharp, with the whisky, for a cool long drink.

The brine in deep-sea shrimps were sweet
To the smart pickle of that meat;
The thirst of labour in blazing sun
Were cool and smooth to the rage begun
With the first bite, in gullet and mouth;
And soon a tingling parching drouth
Flayed his throat as though it had been
Dried with quicklime, raspt by shagreen.
And cup after cup laced generously
Liquor'd his nettled palate, till he
Grew easy-minded and talkative,
And often sprawled aside to give
The wench a fondling slack caress,
Twixt mouthfuls of his salty mess.

And still that gaunt demure old lady, set
In visionary rigour, kept her mind
Averted, and her awkward figure still
As ebony carving, while her active hands
Danced lightly over the notes in trivial airs.

THE YOUTH. Does she go by steam?
THE WENCH. She 's a curio.
But she can play.
THE YOUTH. Pretty well, pretty well.
Who put the poker down her back?
THE WENCH. She 's daft.
She 's hazed herself with hours of sitting still
And strumming in black clothes. If I slid out
And left the lights full on she'd play till morning.—
And where do you work?
THE YOUTH. I'm in a builder's yard.

I'm in the joinery-sheds, where saws and planes
And moulders and the rest spin the whole day,
Chattering and growling and squalling.

THE WENCH. Are they machines?
I thought such things were tools you carry about.

THE YOUTH. We're all machinery in the sheds. The roof
Is full of rumbling axles, and you walk
Dodging the flapping criss-cross of the belts
That bring the power slanting to the benches.
I run a morticing machine myself.

THE WENCH. Are any Jews in your shop?

THE YOUTH. Ay, there 's one.
I'm down on Jews; I owe them something bitter.
This one cuts wood-blocks at a circular saw;
A dirty Jew! Dirt? There is just one spot
That he keeps clean. Where do you think it is?

THE WENCH. I shouldn't like to say.

THE YOUTH. The end of his nose.
And not because he means it: but it dips
Into his tea at every drink he takes,
And washes itself pale as the white of his eyes
In his brown visnomy, just the fat tip.
I paid him out, though.

THE WENCH. How?

THE YOUTH. To make his blocks
He pushes the wrought scantling to a stop
And guides it past the humming saw; and slice
It goes like cutting cheese, and a howling yelp
At every slice like thrashing a puppy-dog.

THE WENCH. Who is it yelps? The Jew?

THE YOUTH. He did yelp once;
For I was strolling by, and right in the nick
Nudged the beast's elbow, and his hand just grazed
The screaming teeth. O, Mister Jew screamed then;
It sheared his thumb off, clean as you could wish.

THE WENCH. There 's a smart daring lad. And was there trouble?

THE YOUTH. The whole shop swore him down, gaffer and all;
Swore black was white, that I was at my bench.
THE WENCH. Well, shall we go upstairs?
THE YOUTH. Here 's to free love!

For tipsy enough she reckoned him by this
To let her sneaking hands unheeded go
Ransacking through his pockets while he bent
In earnest all his mind on fuddled lust.
She steadied him across the floor and steered
His lurches to the stairs, cuddling so close
That her embrace, before they were half-way,
Learnt the likely pockets for her to rummage.
They had a giggling scuffle to get through
The doorway; and for all she clipt him firm
And braced herself to hold him, he reeled off
So wide, he nearly stagger'd in her chair
That wistfully unalterable old lady
Keeping her tunes cheerily jigging along
Like clockwork; but no flicker changed her gaze
Yonderly upward at the wallpaper,
No muscle for the scrimmage at her side
Slackened a moment in her angular
Steadfast unconcern. And still she sat
In the same empty unmoving speculation,
And still her fingers went the same glib gait,
Pouncing delicately, after the wench
Had hauled her sot upstairs.

A little girl
Ran frighten'd from outside into the shop,
Calling as she ran, 'Miss Cissy! Miss Cissy!'
Her breath, from racing there, caught in her throat,
And her voice hardly shrilled above the old lady's
Never-ending trickle of giddy noise.
But the wench heard and hurried down; the youth
Came lungeing after her, tripping himself

At every step, and loutishly stood by.
And still the serene old lady prettily played.

THE WENCH. Didn't I tell you never to come again?
THE CHILD. But it 's your mother, miss.
THE WENCH. Now you trot back:
Tell her from me I'll not be harried here.
I've had enough of her to-day.
THE CHILD. But, miss,
She 's dead.
THE WENCH. What?—Stop that tinkling shindy, do!

She leant across, and struck those flippant hands
Down from the keys. The old lady settled back
Unruffled in her chair, grave and ignoring;
And blandly waited to begin again.

THE WENCH. Now what 's this story?
THE CHILD. When my aunty called,
There was your mother lying along the floor
As if she'd sprung out of bed—stiff as a crutch
And flat as a flounder, aunty said she was.
THE WENCH. Nay, I should think hardly as flat as that.

She studied her own thoughts a moment. Then,
Pleasantly brisking round on the old lady,
She said a thing to pierce that distant mind.

THE WENCH. I'm finisht here: I shan't come back again.
Nobody now swallowing all I can earn!
I'll pick up easy money on my own.
Keep up your heart and give them lovely tunes.

And she and the child were gone. But looking like
Bewilder'd terror now the old lady gaped
After them, and a gleam of frantic passion
Leapt to her eyes swift as a spark from steel;
Then quencht. And gently to herself she said,
'So she 's the one to escape. She would, of course.'

The young man suddenly roused out of his daze:
Where was free love?—He'd lost his chance somehow!
He shoved himself upright away from the wall
Where he had propt his swimming shoulders, stood
Quavering, and then propt himself again
With arms in front, leaning over a table.
He shouted, 'Do you mean to swindle me?
She'd made me pay her, up there on the stairs.
I'll tell the police! I'll have the law on you!'

Then the old lady, clenching her lips, and staring
With wide pale eyes at him, slowly stood up,
Decent and black, and very lean and tall.
She must have clutcht her head, for, if it was
The first time in her life, her bonnet now
Tipt ridiculously awry. She reacht
Her hand out for a pot of scarlet grasses,
And poised it ready to shy. 'Get out!' she said,
Very quietly. But 'twas the look of her
That startled him like drenching icy water:
'God love me! I've lit among the maniacs!'
He stumbled out, anxiously eyeing her.

So she sat down again. As if she had been
A puppet carefully lower'd on to the chair,
Her limbs folded themselves precise and stiff
Back into her strict attitude again:
With shoulders huncht a little, leaning head,
And elbows squeezed tight in against a waist
Straight as a plank. Unmoving she sat on,
Lonely and prim, lost in a gaze at nothing.

'Another one will come to take her place;
And I shall still be here, luring them in.'

Her hands strayed to the keyboard, hesitated,
Fumbled softly, and then ran off in trills
And graces of a skipping flighty tune.

RYTON FIRS

FOR DAVID, MICHAEL, RALPH

DEAR boys, they've killed our woods: the ground
Now looks ashamed, to be shorn so bare;
Naked lank ridge and brooding mound
Seem shivering cowed in the April air.

They well may starve, hills that have been
So richly and so sturdily fleeced!
Who made this upland, once so green,
Crouch comfortless, like an ill-used beast?

There was a fool who had pulled fierce faces
At his photographer thirty years;
He swore, Now I'll put you through your paces,
Jaegers, Uhlans, and Grenadiers!

Was he to blame? Or the looking-glass
That taught him his moustachioes?
How could that joke for an Attila pass?
Who was to blame? Nobody knows.

He but let loose the frantic mood
That toppled Europe down pell-mell;
It rippled against our quietude,
And Ryton Firs, like Europe, fell.

Now the axe hews, the bill-hook lops.
The owls have flown to Clifford's Mesne,
The foxes found another copse;
The badger trotted to Mitcheldean.

But where is our cool pine-fragrance fled?
Where now our sun-fleckt loitering hours,
Wading in yellow or azure or red,
Daffodil, bluebell, foxglove flowers?

Where is our spring's woodland delight
To scatter her small green fires like dew?
Our riding, a blade of golden light
Cleaving our summer shade in two?

The wind comes noiseless down the hill
That once might just have left the sea,
And would our Glostershire windows fill
With a sound like the shores of Anglesey.

The poor trees, all undignified,
Mere logs, that could so sing and gleam,
Laid out in long rows side by side
Across the sloping ground, might seem

A monstrous march of rugged brown
Caterpillars, gigantically
Over the hill-top swarming down
To browse their own lopt greenery.

The last we saw of our lovely friends!
Cannibal grubs!—Then came the wains
To cart them off; their story ends
Not upright still in the winds and the rains

(As tall trees hope to end) at sea,
In graces drest that whiter shine
Than glittering winter: no, but to be
Props in a Glamorgan mine.

So come: where once we loved their shade,
We'll take their ghost an offering now.
Here is an image I have made:
Guarini and Tasso showed me how.

. . . . .

Ryton Firs are alive again! And I
In the heart of them am happy once again!

All round the knoll, on days of quietest air,
Secrets are being told: if it were high wind,
And the talk of the trees as loud as roaring drums,
Still 't would be secrets, shouted instead of whisper'd.

There must have been a warning given once:
'No tree, on pain of withering and sawfly,
To reach the slimmest of his snaky toes

Into this mounded sward and rumple it;
All trees stand back: taboo is on this soil.'—

The trees have always scrupulously obeyed.
The grass, that elsewhere grows as best it may
Under the larches, countable long nesh blades,
Here in clear sky pads the ground thick and close
As wool upon a Southdown wether's back;
And as in Southdown wool, your hand must sink
Up to the wrist before it finds the roots.
A bed for summer afternoons, this grass;
But in the spring, not too softly entangling
For lively feet to dance on, when the green
Flashes with daffodils. From Marcle way,
From Dymock, Kempley, Newent, Bromesberrow,
Redmarley, all the meadowland daffodils seem
Running in golden tides to Ryton Firs,
To make the knot of steep little wooded hills
Their brightest show: O bella età de l'oro!
Now I breathe you again, my woods of Ryton:
Not only golden with your daffodil light
Lying in pools on the loose dusky ground
Beneath the larches, tumbling in broad rivers
Down sloping grass under the cherry trees
And birches: but among your branches clinging
A mist of that Ferrara-gold I first
Loved in those easy hours you made so green.
And hark! you are full of voices now! as if
Ferrara day-dreams had come back to earth
In Glostershire, transforming to a troop
Of lads and lasses, and presently a dance,
Those mornings when your alleys of long light
And your brown rosin-scented shadows were
Enchanted with the laughter of my boys.

THE VOICES

'Follow my heart, my dancing feet,
Dance as blithe as my heart can beat:

Dancing alone can understand
What a heavenly way we pass,
Treading the green and golden land,
Daffodillies and grass.'

'I had a song, too, on my road,
But mine was in my eyes;
For Malvern Hills were with me all the way,
Singing loveliest visible melodies
Blue as a south-sea bay;
And ruddy as wine of France
Breadths of new-turn'd ploughland under them glowed.
'Twas my heart then must dance
To dwell in my delight;
No need to sing when all in song my sight
Moved over hills so musically made
And with such colour played.—
And only yesterday it was I saw
Veil'd in streamers of grey wavering smoke
My shapely Malvern Hills.
That was the last hail-storm to trouble spring:
He came in gloomy haste,
Pusht in front of the white clouds quietly basking,
In such a hurry he tript against the hills,
And stumbling forward spilt over his shoulders
All his black baggage held,
Streaking downpour of hail.
Then fled dismayed, and the sun in golden glee
And the high white clouds laught down his dusky ghost.'

'For all that 's left of winter
Is moisture in the ground.
When I came down the valley last, the sun
Just thawed the grass and made me gentle turf;
But still the frost was bony underneath.
Now moles take burrowing jaunts abroad, and ply
Their shovelling hands in earth

As nimbly as the strokes
Of a swimmer in a long dive under water.
The meadows in the sun are twice as green
For all the scatter of fresh red mounded earth,
The mischief of the moles:
No dullish red, Glostershire earth new-delved
In April! And I think shows fairest where
These rummaging small rogues have been at work.
If you will look the way the sunlight slants
Making the grass one great green gem of light,
Bright earth, crimson and even
Scarlet, everywhere tracks
The rambling underground affairs of moles:
Though 'tis but kestrel-bay,
Looking against the sun.'

'But here 's the happiest light can lie on ground,
Grass sloping under trees
Alive with yellow shine of daffodils!
If quicksilver were gold,
And troubled pools of it shaking in the sun,
It were not such a fancy of bickering gleam
As Ryton daffodils when the air but stirs.
And all the miles and miles of meadowland
The spring makes golden ways,
Lead here; for here the gold
Grows brightest for our eyes,
And for our hearts lovelier even than love.
So here, each spring, our daffodil festival.'

'How smooth and quick the year
Spins me the seasons round!
How many days have slid across my mind
Since we had snow pitying the frozen ground!
Then winter sunshine cheered
The bitter skies; the snow,
Reluctantly obeying lofty winds,

Drew off in shining clouds,
Wishing it still might love
With its white mercy the cold earth beneath.
But when the beautiful ground
Lights upward all the air,
Noon thaws the frozen eaves,
And makes the rime on post and paling steam
Silvery blue smoke in the golden day.
And soon from loaded trees in noiseless woods
The snows slip thudding down,
Scattering in their trail
Bright icy sparkles through the glittering air;
And the fir-branches, patiently bent so long,
Sigh as they lift themselves to rights again.
Then warm moist hours steal in,
Such as can draw the year's
First fragrance from the sap of cherry wood
Or from the leaves of budless violets;
And travellers in lanes
Catch the hot tawny smell
Reynard's damp fur left as he sneakt marauding
Across from gap to gap;
And in the larch woods on the highest boughs
The long-eared owls like grey cats sitting still
Peer down to quizz the passengers below.'

'Light has killed the winter and all dark dreams.
Now winds live all in light,
Light has come down to earth and blossoms here,
And we have golden minds.
From out the long shade of a road high-bankt,
I came on shelving fields;
And from my feet cascading,
Streaming down the land,
Flickering lavish of daffodils flowed and fell;
Like sunlight on a water thrill'd with haste,
Such clear pale quivering flame,

But a flame even more marvellously yellow.
And all the way to Ryton here I walkt
Ankle-deep in light.
It was as if the world had just begun;
And in a mind new-made
Of shadowless delight
My spirit drank my flashing senses in,
And gloried to be made
Of young mortality.
No darker joy than this
Golden amazement now
Shall dare intrude into our dazzling lives:
Stain were it now to know
Mists of sweet warmth and deep delicious colour,
Those lovable accomplices that come
Befriending languid hours.'

THE DANCE

It is known to the world what a sight may be seen
In Herefordshire and Glostershire
As soon as earth remembers how to flower;
In a flood running over the fresh of the green
The daffodils pour like a cool fire:
Keep off and mind your manners, you young man.

It is like as the morning were spread on the ground
In Herefordshire and Glostershire,
And we were dancing on the golden hour;
Such a shimmering gleam is on meadow and mound,
And giving our minds such bright attire:
Leave eyeing me so bold, you forward maid.

We will call for a sorrow to pester her, she
Who 's robbing us for the market-buyer,
The crone who strips the field our dances scour;
And especially everyone spoiling our glee
With trouble of love and love's desire:
Keep off and mind your manners, you young man.

And a sorrow the farmer shall have for his spite
Who scythes at our gold before it tire,
Because the blue leaves make his mown grass sour;
And another who brings on our shining delight
The tarnishing moods sweethearts require:
Leave eyeing me so bold, you forward maid.

THE OLYMPIANS

This was in Crete, and many years ago:
A lonely hut high on a mountain-side,
Under a peak that strained in icy stone
To thrust an endless gesture at the stars.

Two peasants in the hut, mother and son,
Were talking; and it sharpen'd their dispute,
That often it was troublesome to speak
Above the sound of rain, driven so hard
It smackt the walls like pebbles thrown in volleys,
And above surges of the sound of wind
That tore itself among the crags above them,
And made the mountain hollows and ravines
Snore like jars of bronze in its monstrous breath.

Yet it was time for pleasant days. The earth—
Her ground like tinder after the crumbling frosts—
Waited for spring to touch her and unseal
Her secret nature like the birth of fire.
Full time it was for the woods to toss their flame,
Burning with every green that water knows:
From oaks green-gold like waves against the sun
That roll a golden gleam in their green mounds,
To birches like the quiet depth beside
Sheer downward cliffs, where surface of green light
Is mixt with blue from under. And already
Flowers begin to hire the flight of bees
At a delicious wage to carry love,

Golden negotiation, to mates unknown.
But the storm came, and with its trampling rain
Trod out the first green sparks of the spring's fire.

Not heeding the loud air, these peasants talkt.

SON. But 'tis a trade despised.
MOTHER. By tongues that go
Like tails of cows in summer, flicking the clegs.
A trade despised? I ask you, is man a beast,
Or is he man?
SON. He 's man until he 's dirt;
And aren't they rightly scorned who deal with dirt?
MOTHER. The kitten miaows his scorn of the old cat!
But she can wash her own face still; and you,
Nice as you are now, think on this a little,
That all these years it is my trade you've lived on.
SON. I know, I know: but let it be my turn now;
I can be earning now for both of us,
And you can leave corpse-tending.
MOTHER. And why should I?
You make your name abroad for a strong worker,
I'll keep my name for setting corpses right.
SON. My name 's honest: I'ld be ashamed of yours.
MOTHER. Is man a beast, I say, or is he man?
And what is most the man in him? 'Tis pride.
And go through all his uses, you'll not see
The pride of man so sturdy as in my art:
Pride that will stand when all things else have fallen.
Man will not go to his corruption like
A pitiful beast, huddled as death has left him;
But decently, a corpse still proud to be man,
Dignity sleeping sound, as I have left him.
I'll tell you how to think of me. You've seen
A twisted shell, worn with an age of journeying
Under the sea among the knocking stones,
Beacht by the tide? And what the breath of a man
Can do with the marred and shabby thing, you know:

He can blow such a call of trumpeting through it,
No thundering of the surf can roar him down.
I am a mean old crone; but in my trade
There is a great use made of me: I bid
The power of death make room for the pride of man.

SON. You give it out a fine thing. But I'm sure
It 's a vile business you were best be quit of.

MOTHER. Nay, there 's an art with corpses; and I enjoy it,
Like a shaper of good statues. And the mourners
Thinking themselves important with their crying,
I enjoy them, I knowing all the while
Death would have none of their howling ceremony
Without my skill. And I will eat their sins
Sometimes. 'Twere pity if my corpses lookt
Proud to be dead, while all the company round
Felt cowering in the midst the spectre of sin.

SON. Who cares what a scavenging dog eats? Nothing to them
That you, the corpse-straker, should be defiled
By meals of their rank evil, so low they think you.

MOTHER. Let them be thinking. They give me their sins
Like children laying pranks of mischief on
Their easy nurse, who smiles to bear the blame.

Just as a sudden astonishing shatter of din
Will stun the speech of those who talk in quiet:
So these who talkt amidst unheeded rage
Of noises, were struck speechless when there smote
Upon the hurlying outcry of the storm
About them, hugely and heavily a silence
Down like the shock of a hammer. No smallest whine
Of sound was left: though strangely in their ears
The tyrannous silence rang like jarring metal.
And in that breathless pause, fearfully startling
It was to hear a pushing at the door,
And the latch rattle: and feebly blundering in
An old man came, a hideous bent old man,
Barefoot and limping, foul to his knees with mud,

In sopt and tatter'd beggarly clothes. He stood
And bleared upon the candle, stoopt and gaping,
The tremble of his spare neck thrusting forward
The weight of his head, poised like a baboon's.
From pucker'd clefts as red as wounds his eyes
Lookt weeping; but behind the mask of age
The bone of his brow and face was framed to hold
Majesty and decree of mighty spirit,
Superb above control of common fate,
Before the scorching years such horrible skin
Had stretcht upon it. A little while he strove,
Remembering some old royal way of standing,
To right the crooked warping of his spine;
But could not. Then he spoke. His voice
Came like a trumpet when the brass is flawed:
Such resonant muster in that noble skull
Of tones that from such fretted strings began.

'O Cretans, he is dead!'
He stumbled back,
And then came burden'd in again. He bore,
Lapt in a goatskin bundle, some small weight
A boy might swing in single-handed play;
But gasping work for him to be its porter.
Then like a thing to be tenderly used, he set
His parcel on the bench; and to his hosts
Turned the absurd deformity of grief
Tormenting age: with dropt jaw quivering,
Eyebrows curved high-pitcht over their sockets
In anxious bridges, pushing his forehead rugged
Up to his pate in creases like half-rounds
Of ripples held by a buttress in a stream.
And leaning over the small thing that lay
Wrapt up before him, at last he spoke again.

OLD MAN. He is dead now, and you must be with me
In burying him.
MOTHER. A baby! And by your speech

You're some outlandish vagabond. I'll be bound
You've made some demon happy with the blood
And burnt fat of the child: ay, it has been
Some wizard's murder.

SON. You go too hard on him.
Look how his ancient mind peers from his face
To make your meaning out. He brings no harm.

MOTHER. What, no harm for a tramping rogue to bring
Out of a fiend's holiday of a storm,
A dead baby? I warrant he deals in them,
A sorcerers' body-monger. And the wind,
When he came in, fell headlong down to quiet,
Down like a drunk man bawling over a cliff:
Be sure there is some wickedness leagued with him.—
Whose is this baby? Have you strangled it?

SON. The grasp, see, of those tremulous hands would scarce
Strangle a worm.

OLD MAN. You said the storm had finisht?
I should have noted that. Indeed, it has done
The work they meant; ay, they would whistle it back
To kennel, now it has worried him to death.
Soon as I pickt him up to carry him here,
They loosed on us that baying storm to hound
My stumbling the whole way. With a hundred jaws
It tore at him to snatch him from my arms
Where he lay whimpering; and terror at last
Of all that hatred yelling in his face,
Mad to have him and savage him, wrung his heart
So hard, life could quiver no longer in it.
All 's ended now; and now it is for you
To bury him. And will you eat his sins?

This was an eager question; and the consent
She nodded, seemed to be somehow startled from her.
But, to assure herself she gave it freely,
She chatted some stock wisdom of her trade.

MOTHER. O I will eat the sins of the poor bairn:

An easy mouthful that. The killjoy death,
To come so soon! Who knows, if he had grown,
What lusty wickedness I might have had
To swallow for him? But as it is I think,
Baby, your little secret spawn of sins
Will trouble me with no heartburn. This is the way.—
And you, boy, be stirring: undo the brat.

She took a crust, sopt it and salted it,
And gave it to the crouching man; and he
Over the bundled thing upon the bench
Handed the morsel back. She muncht it down;
Then went about the things her skill would need.
Truly she was unwilling; but in their minds
The look of his tarnisht eyes strange thrill'd,
As if invisibly burning rays were piercing
Among their thoughts, and gathering them to shape
The act of his desire, like dust of iron
Drawn into pattern of a magnet's power.

Yet as she turned from bolting down the crust
Her casual rite had made bitter as tears
For the reproach of sin: to see her go
Busily searching in her corners and cupboards,
Arrested him in a staring blank of wonder;
Like an astonisht plowman at a fair,
Who gapes after a juggling tightrope-walker,
Seeing him, when his risky show is done,
Push unconcerned and whistling through the crowd:
In such a puzzle the old man stood, to find
She made so little of those eaten sins.

Meanwhile, she ferreting for cloths and pans,
And the doddering man lost in his feckless gaze,
The son was fingering the knots that kept
That sorry luggage fasten'd. Loath though he was
To open it, he could not fumble long,

Such folly was the slack and feeble tying.
A stealing cat, left in a room alone
Where supper 's on the table, smelling out
A dram of milk low down in a narrow jug:
Careful not to be noisy and not to spill,
Her dainty paw dips in and soaks her fur,
Then daintily draws out again and licks
The dripping theft. Even so gingerly
Into the bundle's folds his hand went loosening.

She heard, the mother bustling with her things,
Suddenly heard, from where she left her son,
Such a harsh force of desperate breath as comes
From lungs coopt in hard agony of terror,
When muscles fiercely clench about the ribs
Like a red-hot tyre shrunk on a smoking wheel.
She turned, and saw her boy in palsy, his arms
Fixt half-way raised, and eyes that could not wink
But only glare into the open'd pack.
She scurried to him; and a grim thing lay
For her to see: no baby, but a man
Unbelievably wither'd into age,
The cinder of a man, parcht and blasted
As puny and brown as the mummy of a baby,
His body all drawn up into a fist;
The pined legs, crooked as burnt candle-wicks,
So taut with perisht sinews that their knees
Thrusted the shrivelled belly; and his arms
Hugg'd his chest with little twisted hands.
But nothing babyish the great famisht head
Contorted down: the sharp edge of the jaws,
With thin beard scanted to a snowy wool;
The lean nose peaking like a puffin's bill;
And brow and brainpan glistening like wrought wood,
And vaulted for a god's imagination.

But he, the wretch who brought that dreadful parcel,

Still lookt towards where the woman had been busy,
A standing shivering swoon. They turned on him;
The life in them broke loose from pausing aghast,
And clamoured like a stream bursting a weir.
Angrily afraid, she wrung his shoulder:
'Leave off your doating, you horrible old man;
What 's this you've brought us?' Then again he tried
To brave the burden of his years and stand
Upright before their question; and again
He summon'd from his wreck of royal life
Commanding voice: five words were toil enough
Now for the voice of his greatness to endure
Before it broke:
'Zeus! It is Father Zeus!'

Grief humbled him to the ground. Down he fell
As low as worship before these poor folk,
Hiding his face, sobbing for shame, and muttering:
'The thundering Zeus! His favour was the prayer
Of gods and men, his sentence was their lives:
And now that little loathsome thing! And I,
This dying misery of crippled age,
I am Apollo, I am Apollo.'

A long while, breathing shrill and quick, he lay;
At last, a little raising his abasement,
And giving something of Olympian manner
To the poor dwindled voice, that yet must rasp
Laborious whisper like the drag of a rope
Over a whining pulley when he that hauls
Pauses often for breath—he told his tale.

APOLLO. We were upon the mountainous height of the gods
That has the whole world under it; and thence—
Like purity of mountain-water streaming
Down to salt seas from crags that gleam in heaven—
Our divine life down from that lofty quiet

Descended to the brackish tides of men:
Fresh heavenly water sweetening the vast salt,
A shining song into the helpless roaring.

Yet it may be sometimes, ages of water
Will grind a steep of ancient rock to soil,
And soil will flourish into moss and weed,
Till where bright water plunged, a sloth of moisture
Soaks down from ledge to ledge of sodden turf:
Had some change grown betwixt our height and men,
To hold the speed and plenty of our gift,
And we knew nothing of it?—And to our sight,
Lightly scanning the haze of things to come
(For scope we had in time as easily
As in the distance of the earth), appeared
Low down, like darkness charged with slumbering fire,
The far-off patience of some grand event
Biding its time, dreaming itself set free
In dreams that made its darkness suddenly blaze.
We glanced at it as feasted men will look
At lightning, when the storm is so far off
The winking glare burns noiseless as the stars
Along the rim of pale sweet summer night,
Casting a moment's shadow from the trees.
Or if fear toucht our minds, it was as light
As tickling threads of spider-work will touch
The face of one who loiters in the evening.

Zeus the Father assembled us, and spoke:
'Not only our divinely streaming mountain,
But gods like wandering rains into that brine,
The life of man, have poured replenishing purity.
Bacchus we found conferring himself on men
Out of the flying winds of unknown spirit:
Dying into them like a rain at sea,
Shedding divine fresh water of his life
Over their salty unrest, and thence again

From out the depths of them rising a ghost
Pure of the bitter earth they have dissolved,
Again to pour down in immortal sweetness.
Him we entreated to dwell here, and take
A heavenly name, and be our Dionysus.
So we did well, and he.'

We turned to smile
Brotherly pleasure on our lovely guest.
He was not in his place; he was not found
In heaven that day, the last of heaven's days.
Where had he gone, our belov'd Dionysus?

Zeus spoke again: 'And now another god
Begins. Despise him not, Olympian gods!
We will persuade him too into our league.'

We bent our gaze to earth. Our eager sense
Devoured the height that made the life of man
One swaying tide of motion to and fro;
We saw it in its swarming particles—
Multitudinous atoms of passionate will
Seething in separate purposes. But one place
We noted, where the wrangling little lives
Were ruled by some great passage of event,
All packt one way: as when there have been floods
Sweeping across the meadows, twigs and straws
Lie combed and matted by the vehement water.
So stroked together were these lives, amasst
Towards where, aloft against the cloudy flame
Of scarlet evening, three of their kind they had
Hung up on gallows crosses. A bare mound
Lifted those tall black spikes into the sky,
So that it seemed the nave, and the gaunt poles
The jutting spokes, of a great ruin'd wheel
Sunk to the axle and rotting in a fen.
But in the heaven behind it, the sun's rays
Had made another wheel, with white-hot gold

For nave, and spouted fire for whirling spokes,
The blazing pillars of a wheel that seemed
Gloriously travelling over the earth.

For we had found the new god: and once more
A dying god. His death was while we lookt:
And instantly his deity arose
And blinding stood above his death, and scorned us.
In fierce obedience close behind him croucht
That black and hungry hour we long had seen
Far off. He pointed at us; and in a leap
Darkness was perfect over us. It was
Time, the whole disaster of time compact
In one dense moment, that from the heart of it struck
Accumulated fire, the vengeance stored
For all the debt we had not heeded owing;
And then withdrew, and left us charred with age
To feel our misery awhile. But I,
When I saw Zeus sunk to that infant shape,
Rocking his head and twitching helpless limbs,
Set out to nurse him hither, bearing him
To end where he was born, in Crete.

He stopt.
He was so still they thought it was his death;
But presently they saw his shuddering hands
Work on the floor as they would dig their hold
Clutching into it; and stealing a pace forward,
The woman found his eyes wide and appalled
And fixt upon the door. She turned and lookt:
Something was shining out there in the darkness,
Shining and coming nearer; swords of light
Into the room at sill and lintel pierced,
And lances where the warping boards had parted.
Ever closer and brighter it came, as white
As winter stars, eager as morning sun,
And jetting like the force of a weight of water.

They thought the timber would have shaken and given,
Such pressure of light burst through at every seam;
And now the door's whole wood was full of light
As if it were thin paper against the glare,
The grain like a fine web of glowing threads.
And suddenly there was no door, but space
Of insupportable light, and in the midst
A presence like a beautiful young man.
He stood among them, lookt at Apollo, and laught.

APOLLO. Unhurt, unaged! Dionysus! Thou!
BACCHUS. Call me no more the Olympian name. I am
All Bacchus now again, and have put off
Olympian name and nature. Ay, and wisely,
Now that I study you! To bid farewell
To you and what is left you of your heaven,
I come. It seems you have not learnt the art
Of dying divinely, you Olympian gods.
APOLLO. I am disguised to thee, Bacchus, I think.
BACCHUS. I know you, cripple, easily as I know
That curl of husk yonder was Father Zeus.
APOLLO. And thou hast mightier divinity!
Where hast thou been? How art thou grown so radiant,
Escaping our destruction, thriving in it?
BACCHUS. You never understood me in Olympus.
Your bland and ignorant friendship grew to me
More tiresome than a wheedling fondling love
To one in whom love sickens. You courteous gods!—
What ailed me, siding with that refuse there,
Your Zeus?—Those serene feasts of yours!—And I
Scarcely able to hold in my dark heart
The hatred tugging there to hunt you down
The slope of heaven to graves in the base earth.
You to think yourselves the life of the world!
Not even now you know why death to you
Is the disgraceful end, and I can die
A thousand times and still be living god.

APOLLO. Why must we die? O Bacchus, why must we die?
BACCHUS. Why must the phantom music of a dream
Break, and the lovely colour of its light
Be known no more? You gave no life to the world;
But as the sleepless spirit in the brain
Of a sleeping man fashions delicious dream
Out of the dull pulses of his body:
So the imagining spirit sealed within
The murmuring life of the world, charms its rumour
Into the story of a dream—the life
Of gods, the life uncertain of a dream.
APOLLO. Then what art thou?
BACCHUS. Ay, know me now at last!
A dream dreamt by the world I am indeed:
But yet a dream of what is not the world.
I am the rapture of the measureless force
For ever passing into and beyond
The measured form of the world. The form abides;
But wavering, inconstant, variable:
Even as on the surface of a stream
The whorl of an eddy shifts and slides and totters,
And yet the whorl remains. But like the water
Incessantly supplied, continual haste
Pouring through the frail round of the eddy,
Eternally impetuous is the force
Narrowed into the world and thence escaping.
I am the dream of that unchanging energy,
You of the eddying pattern of the world.
Must there not be, between your dream and mine,
Enmity unappeasable: between
My infinite element that would be nothing
But its own speed for ever, and the small
Shapeliness of your world that catches it
Into a spinning circle: between my dream's
Unseizable joy and unendurable woe,
And your stately manners of order'd feeling,
The graceful pleasure and the decent grief?

Ay, but that is finisht! The Olympian dream
Vanishes: mine is the dream that triumphs now!
The shape of the whorl has stirred and changed: the world
Is no more what it was when you were dreamt
Its images. But what is that to me?
For I am always dreamt and to be dreamt,
I the nameless force that runs for ever.

APOLLO. And will there never be our like again?
Surely again the dream of the world will be
Of gods in whom the shapely measure of things
Lives adorable in its present beauty,
Loving the appointed bounds as songs their music.

BACCHUS. Nay, I am rid of you now: the mind of the world
Is mine; and I will ravish it with desire
Anguishing to be out of the world, despising
All you could give of beauty, for the hope
My passion in its flight beyond all nature
Gives of amazing and incredible freedom.
And let your new gods come: I shall be there
Discrediting them; the world will shift again
To some new manner, and their dream will end;
And I unharmed, the everlasting dream,
Once more shall bid to the departing gods,
Even as now to you,—is it Fare well?
Fare as ye may, dead god and dying god!

He spoke and laught again and was not there.
The glimmering room came back about them like
The blackness of a cavern: and they stood still.
At last that old Apollo, without words,
Bade their blank minds be his. The woman washt
The crumpled thing that had been Zeus; the son
Gather'd it in the goatskin to his breast;
And in the quiet night the three went out
To climb the Cretan mountain. 'Haste! Before
I see the sun, bring me and my business
To the last height of the peak': so the god's thought

Workt in their minds and drove them. Misty dawn
Was known already by the crags, that seemed
To watch each other in their lonely frosts,
While all the earth beneath still slept in cloud.
These peasants and the god at length had climbed
The top of Crete; and like a usual task,
To throw aside the loose and weather'd stones
The son bent down, scooping a shallow hole,
The grave of Zeus; and there the panting woman
Laid in its package the Olympian corpse.

Apollo spoke to them across the grave.

APOLLO. You and these desolate rocks and some few minutes
Are all the world to me now. But it is still
Apollo's world, and the voice of the god is in it,
Announcing, as heretofore, a divine thing.
Hear you the last, ay, and the first and greatest,
Of the Olympian truths: we lived in it,
And out of it our majesty arose,
And that we perish is the witness to it:
Whatever seems, is true! This was our glory,
This is our doom. Not as these cliffs now stand,
Cut off from the earth by cloud, may we survive.
Like the endeavour of arduous faculties
To reach sublime experience, the earth
Exalted them; but now there seems no earth,
Nothing but cloud, and these unfounded crags
Issuing from it, for themselves alone
Maintaining their remote and lofty honour.
So may it not be with the gods. Our world
Required us, and we were. A change has come;
Our world has clouded, and we cannot see it;
The ground of our existence seems annulled:
And to the gods, whatever seems is truth.
The world is ours no more, and we must go;
You look your last upon the broken gods.

Bacchus remains: I know not what new Bacchus,
But what his godhead in your minds will be
I know—the uncreated passion taking
Vengeance on that which holds it in creation,
You, the living world: and you yourselves
Shall worship the revenge he takes on you.
'I the real, the true, the eternal,'
Thus will he cry to you, piercing and thrilling you,
'I am your rescue from the seeming world;
Follow me out of seeming, and I will give you
Inconceivable things.' This is the god
Henceforth: and a breath of the infinite of being
Will touch your minds; and you will scorn to be here
In your mortality under the stars;
And to adore your god you will make yourselves
Worthless lives, the dupes of a worthless world:
And you make Bacchus happy in his revenge!
How long before whatever seems become
Olympian truth again? How long before
You know again the miracle you are,
You minds that master that same infinite being
Into the seeming of establisht world?—
And if it seems, it is!—Here find your gods,
Or be your own contempt: here in your world
Of measured fires rejoicing in the law
That fills the sky with glittering certainty;
The times of earth, and waters in their turns
Of seas and rains and rivers, varying sound
And varying colour of glee; the commonwealth
The exquisite habits of living things contrive;
And that most marvellous creator, thought.
Will you be life once more that loves itself,
And justifies its being to itself?
Then of your world seized into bounded seeming
In midst of flux, let there be gods again:
Zeus, and another son of Zeus, a new
Apollo, god of the life that knows itself

Made of eternal being, but made with power
To overcome the infinite and shape it
Into the beauty of mortality.

But now the warning came: the sun arose,
And struck on him a dreadful finger of light.
He quailed beneath it in a wretched kneeling;
His mouth gaped as if to be speaking still,
But only choked; his hands went to his throat,
Like crazed self-murder at his windpipe gripping;
And then he bowed his head, and tumbled down
Beside that other. Quickly the peasants moved,
Released from him, but not from fear of him,
To load his death, piling a cairn of boulders.

Back in their hut, son and mother no word
Had for each other a long while. At last
The woman, stirring about dinner, spoke:
'Well, you shall have your way. From to-day on,
Let no one come to me for washing corpses:
Nor for sin-eating.—Boy, do you understand
What I have done?—I have eaten the sins of Zeus!'

ZAGREUS

I AM the tortured god who lies in hell
Imagining mankind. Before I fell
Down to this purposeless unholy place,
To sink in mortification and disgrace,
On the great height of the wheeling world elate
I dwelt, a god sublimely fortunate.
The invisible spirit for ever passing on,
Turning the world with thoroughfare unknown
Of flying power, such golden mood on me
Poured, that divine delight of fantasy
Went forth of me creating loveliness

Of life about me, mortal images
Of a god's blissful mind, rejoicing throngs
Enchanting me as may its own sweet songs
The heart of music. Even so now in hell
My tortured mind lives indestructible
Imagining mankind, the busy insane
Detested dream wherein my helpless pain
Beholds itself. For now the slow world's weight,
Eternally disturbed in circular fate,
To depths that like malignant waters drown
The joyful use of being, has borne me down;
And still I must create, and make my night
Of darkness and dishonor quick and alight
With spectacle of life, the swarming fire
Of a god's imagination, a god's desire
Blazing forth in impotent mutiny.
Thus in perpetual vision I must see
Man's life enact itself: that life accurst
Which knows the best and must achieve the worst—
Creature and symbol of my anguish here!
He thinks of beauty and freedom, and there appear
His towns, his factories, his furnaces,
His squalidly elaborate wretchedness.
With power to shape his fate I see him stand;
He who can out of ancient stone command
Metals and secret forces, and make these
His marvellous intelligent slaveries,
Gleaming obedient demons, exquisite skill
And thundering strength, as sensitive to his will
As his own joints to thrilling of his nerves;
He whom the very nature of things serves,
Man who has made Machines, he is my dream
Of the power I have lost—my impotent dream,
Man who has made himself a misery
With his Machines, and still the more must be,
The more his power, the idiot of his fate:
And hating my dream of man, myself I hate.

But this is not my master: stifled here,
Even my own self-hatred I can bear,
Nay, for myself have still insatiable
Desire, knowing there burns within me still
The sleepless virtue of the mind divine
That feeds on all event and makes it mine,
The manner of my life; and can abide
Even in agony strangely satisfied.
And I am not to end in hell:
It has been before, in the world's change,
That tides of darkness over me fell,
To make remember'd heaven as strange
As to the waters buried deep
In bitter darkness of the sea,
Their fresh delighted springs must be
That down the sunny hills would leap.
And it has been that at the last
The night of waters past:
For still the changing world went round,
Out of the depth where I lay vile and drowned
Lifting me on high again
To shine above forgotten pain.
Then in a smooth and sapphire floor,
Firm beneath my feet and bright,
The perilous waters of existence bore
Courteously the journeying of my restored delight.
Out of that favorable sea
Arose like an enchanted land
The fortune that awaited me,
In noble heights where I might stand
Surveying my prosperity.
Thence a delicious welcome came
From forests that, in fragrant flame
Of scarlet blossoming, hung between
Pinnacled splendour of carven snow
And ocean luminous below
With purple depth and shallows green.

Forth for my feet in curving bays
The beaches spread their golden ground,
Inviting me up to grassy ways
And meadows of pleasant summer beyond:
And I ran over the light of the sea,
And took the world prepared for me
Sauntering inland as I went,
In floods of flowers I must wade,
Held in many a sweet delay
To hear the birds such joy invent,
Or note the whispering shiver made
In spinneys of willow silver-grey,
Their delicate bright leaves answering
The stirring airs like flying away
Of sunlit smoke. But I must climb
Above the warm bewitching leas,
Above the droning of the bees
And silvery crickets' throbbing ring;
Above the slopes of vetch and thyme,
Past broom and birches shadowing
Green mountain water in fall and pool
Where musing air dwelt moist and cool;
Towards where from out dark fell of pine
Towering peaks raised sharp and fine
Their gleaming speculation high:
And with my rocks I stood to share
The heavenly space of light and air;
And once again in lonely glee,
Soared out of joy's perplexity
The pure immortal ecstasy,
Perfection of the god in me.
I knew my radiance of joy
Like flame that knows the light it makes:
My joy was round me in winds and seas,
Shone over earth in grass and trees,
And ran in rivers; with fiery flakes
Of infinite joy I starred the night;

And in high clouds my joy was white,
And stately joy beneath them stood
Mountainous in great attitude:
Everywhere colour and shape and sound
Of joy divinely mine, my own,
I knew encompassing me round.
But in the midst of this,
Distinct in singular central bliss,
I to myself was known,
The maker of joy, the flame within:
My soul erect and burning keen
In supreme spire of consciousness
Uttering its own marvellous place,
The world that round about it glowed,
As a flame in light makes its abode.
Then was I in that ecstasy
Such music of intelligence,
That uncontainable beauty thence
Went out in power ranging free;
And sang itself forth circling sweet and clear
To shape, like mastery of sound in air,
Life in my world—energies numberless
Formed in one perfect chime of happiness.

This was: and what has been, will be again.
The god that has no power but in vain
To dream of power: himself a hated thing,
Bound down to hate in turn the posturing
Procession of his creatures round about
His darkness—that old story of long drawn out
Pretentious blundering in a mystery,
The life of man: this very god is he
Whose bliss its own excess shall contemplate
In the image of beautiful life it must create,
And thereby crown himself once more sublimely fortunate.

FOUR SHORT PLAYS

TO
EDWARD MARSH

THE ADDER

Woods in Autumn. A charcoal-burner's hut at the back; a little to one side, a round, flat-topt stack of wood, sheathed in turf, a thin blue smoke coming from the flue-opening in the middle. It is early evening, the undergrowth misted. Night falls as the play goes on.

Two charcoal-burners, Seth and Newby, the latter a bent old man. They are seated on a log, Seth staring at the stack.

NEWBY. You'll not be needing me to-night, I think?—
[*Seth seems not to hear him.*
It is main quiet in a copse these days;
Fall 's here and no mistake: do you snuff the mould?
A queer good smell 'tis, when the mould is making,
And the mist comes bitter with it out of the ground,
Good as the brownest beer was ever brewed.
Nay, not to you, though,—you, a Methody man
And sworn off beer and tobacco. Do you get
The worth of them, I wonder, in your chapel?
That Mister Startup, that flash parson of yourn,
Can daze your wits with preaching, and they say
You can deal prayers that smack upon your tongue:
But 'tisn't the same as a black pipe and a good tap.
Why don't you talk? You seem all in a mood.
You'll not be wanting me to-night, Seth?
SETH [*rousing himself*]. No.
A sod or two is all the stack will need;
She 's burning gently. But stay here awhile.—
Squire 's come home, they say?
NEWBY. Ay: I suppose
He'ld liever die at home.
SETH. As bad as that?
NEWBY. If a man like Squire rummages London town
For wickedness, all the wild spunk in him

Driving him on full hurl, chasing his lust
Mad as a trooper swording in a charge,—
He 's bound to shatter. Flesh ain't made for that.
Met him myself to-day. You never saw
A brow with such a fiendish writing on it.
'Hallo, Mud,' says he; 'Newby, sir,' says I;
'What does it feel like to be earth,' says he,
'Damn you!'—I don't see why he damned me? Lord!
The brow of the man! When he 's in hell, he'll curse
The brindled devil himself for a tame lamb.

SETH. I know, Newby, what 's in him. Once, my brow
Was sealed like his. How did he look beside?

NEWBY. Oh, his face as hard as a carving; though, as he talkt,
He foisted on his mouth a kind of twitching,
A kind of smile, that couldn't help but sneer.
But truly I lookt at naught but his hurt brow.

SETH. Hurt! Yes, 'tis hurt indeed.

NEWBY. It made me think
Of a hound I once saw, that was inwardly scorcht
With swallowed poison, and wrencht hard,—that brow
With lines like two big weals running straight up
Pucker'd on either side;—how comes a man
So signed? Deuce! I should think his forehead aches!
You know how a green leaf put upon the fire
Twists and bends backwards, till you'd think the heat
Tortured it? Well, somehow his brow 's like that.
And he scarce gone thirty!

SETH. But he has laboured!
He has wickedly mown the harvest of his life;
Now it 's all stubble, and it stabs his feet.
But stubble must be burnt!

NEWBY. Ay, gi'e us a prayer!
One of your clockwork rants.

SETH. [*Taking no notice.*] I read the man.
His lusts follow him like tame dogs, diseased
And full of weeping sores; and let him rest
A moment, all the loving pack yelps up,

One or another leaps upon his knee,
Vile mange and all, and nestles at his heart.
Oh, yes, I know. He 's tried to gorge his sin,
And yet he cannot dull himself; his brain
Is bitterly tired of being always sin,
But still he must be imagining new evil;
And it all turns to the same small filthy tricks,
The same foul dabbling that he sickens at.
I know it all; my God, don't I know it!

NEWBY. A queasy hunger, eh? See now, you were
A pretty lot yourself, until you turned
Methody; why don't you try your prayers on Squire?

SETH. Hold your noise, old fool.

NEWBY. Well, I'll be crawling.

SETH. No. Stay a bit. I want to ask you . . .

NEWBY. What?

SETH. O, has he had his milk? [*Pointing to the hut.*]

NEWBY. The adder? Why, you gave it him yourself.
'Tis an uneasy worm to-night. He lifts
His neck straight up, and keeps his tongue aquiver;
He looks for something. Worms should be sleepy now.
Why does he wake?

SETH. Pah! What should he look for?
You old men think an adder is a spirit.

NEWBY. We know the woods and understand their folk.
We aren't dazed with grammar. Schools and books
May grind the trade in a man to a Sheffield knife;
But put a scholar in the woods: he'll make
No more of them than a dog would make of a book.
[*Seizing Seth's arm.*
Listen to the air, Seth; look around. You fool!
Will you be wiser than these, my Methody?
Will you be telling me man 's master here?
But I'll tell you; this half-light, the fall's quiet,
The harmless timber,—they all bide their time:
They are all sworn together, and against us.
Keep still a minute now, and catch your breath,

And let the hour have you. Can you not feel
The woods crouch like a beast behind your back?
And now look round. Where 's the beast gone that croucht?
But we're in the midst of something biding its time.
Don't you know men who fear the woods at night
Worse than a ghost? But was there ever one
Who kept an adder in his hut, the trees
Could have the soul of? Put your heel on the worm,
And in a year the trees will drink you up,
Take the man out of you, as a beech drains
And spoils the earth he stands in.

SETH. Heathen talk.
There 's a belief can bless the prowling night,
Send off afraid the old terrors that come
To craze the soul with leering through its windows.
I have the faith. I am secure.

NEWBY. Now, Seth,
See here. You are the man for Mister Startup,
Your brummagem parson, and the Methody lot;
None like you at a prayer. What would they say,
Your ranters, if they heard you kept a snake,
An aged heathen adder, in your hut,
And there 's no burner in the country puts
Such faith in the worm.

SETH. Not I: it 's naught to me.

NEWBY. Good; then I'm going to kill him. [*He makes for the hut.*]

SETH [*springs up and holds him back*]. Stop, you fool!

NEWBY. Ay, so it 's naught to you? You might have known
I wouldn't kill him.

SETH. Newby, you'll keep it hid?

NEWBY. Why, the man 's twittering. No, your chapel-folks
Shall have no word from me. What do they know?
What can their silly-fangled hymns and prayers
And Startup's teaching tell them of the woods
And the old things our trade comes up against?

SETH. O I'm not one of your pagan-witted burners.
There is a special bond for me.

NEWBY. Ay, so?
Well, let me keep my way. I don't shudder
As if the worm were sliding down my neck
When there 's a mention of it.
SETH. Newby, 'tis said,
In foreign lands (it is a horrible thing)
Women in sleep have suckled snakes—they've been
Roused by cold, venomous lips drawing their milk.
It 's worse with me. For I am nourishing him,
That viper shut up in the box in yonder,
I'm nourishing him, Newby, with my mind.
NEWBY [*laughing*]. And you the man for a prayer above them all!
Hark!
SETH. What did you hear?
NEWBY. The footing of a man
In the long riding.
SETH. Who'ld be rambling now?
NEWBY. Squire, maybe, roaming the fever off him.
Sounds reach a long way in this quiet air.
But it is time I went, or I'll be missing
The best of the evening at the 'Hark to Melody.'
SETH. No, no, don't make to go.
NEWBY. What is it then?
SETH [*hastily*]. My girl 's come back to me.
NEWBY. Well, what of that?
SETH. 'Twas yesterday she came. My sister 's dead,
She'd nowhere else to live. What shall I do,
Newby, what shall I do?
NEWBY. What are you gabbling?
You're a queer father.
SETH. Newby, but it 's the Squire!
NEWBY. Frightened of him, are you? Well then, warn her.
SETH [*starting*]. Warn her? No; warning wouldn't do.
NEWBY. Why not?
SETH. I dreamt my sister came out of her death
To me last night, and awfully she spoke:
'Seth, the girl 's in your keeping now!'

NEWBY. Why not?
Who else should keep her? What 's your fear in the girl?
SETH. I'll tell you: 'tis myself I fear in her.
NEWBY. I don't take that.
SETH. Why, in my wickedness
Was her beginning: out of my rebellion
She came!
NEWBY. I suppose she had a mother, though.
SETH. We'll leave her out of this. If there is sin
Sown in the girl, it is all mine; there was
Enough flourishing in my blood to choke
With tares and weeds the innocence of the heart
I forced to live.
NEWBY. Ay, and it is the truth
'Tis hard to make clean earth of twitch-grown soil.
SETH. And then to love the girl so much! Do you think
It can be right to love—one of such birth
So fiercely—O, so terribly to love her?
If lovers have a child, be they right or wrong
In loving, they must give the bairn their hearts.
But mine came into flesh so wickedly
She is a sin! My sin she is! My hate
Of the Lord God, my scorning of His laws,
My mere joy in delighting all my lust!
NEWBY. A child 's a child, I think.
SETH. You know nothing.
I was all made of sin when she was born.
But out of the villainous hubbub of my life
The good hands of my sister stole my baby;
Took her away and kept her hid from me,
And I went on in wickedness. My Lord,
I did not want to sin.
I would be sickening at the beastliness
I'd forced my helpless spirit to devour;
And right into my ailing grief would blaze
Lust like a golden trumpet; and like singing
My blood would leap into its joy again;

And I was drabbing again.

NEWBY [*not hiding his disgust*]. And it went on
Till the blood was tired in you?

SETH. It may be.—No,
God forgive you! Heaven remembered me!

NEWBY. The two things happen together, very often.

SETH. The Lord sent down a burning blight upon
My mastery of sin, and like a flame
Undid the briars that were round my ankles,
Crippled the spiny fingers that had hold,
With hookèd thorns driven into my heart,
Upon my life, the wild thickets of sin:
He took me out of the devil's wood, and I
Have never left to serve Him.

NEWBY. And, O Glory,
Startup's right-hand man ever since, Amen!

SETH. Yes, I was saved. But then there was this soul
Mortally wearing flesh and blood of mine,
My girl, my little daughter,—my flesh, Newby!
Ay, and there are those sins of mine! You know,
When the mercy of God whips off the hunt
That is so greedy after a man, they still,
His pack of sins, roam somewhere, empty and hungry.—
My sins are lurking for the flesh they tasted
And liked so well, the flesh that is my daughter.

NEWBY. Then you'd do well to warn her ears against
Their barking, if it 's dogs they are, your sins.

SETH. We did better than that.—Dogs? Nought so fierce,
But something sly and quiet and creeping close
Upon the earth and waiting for to sting;
Yet they can only live in that dark wood
Where the fiend has his cave, and all the things
That are unholy crouch away from God:
You must go walking in the wicked ground
Before the poison of sin can strike at you.

[*Newby shrugs at him.*

When I turned back from wickedness, I and my sister

Were of one mind. This little lass of mine
Should never know, till she were grown and safe,
Where evil lies; for sure must it not be
She could not stray there, if she'd heard nought of it?
Not knowing evil, could she find it out?—
That fearful pride in disobeying God
At least would have no words to madden her!—
My sister reared her, gave her all her schooling;
Her lonely house and the empty moor behind,
No more world than that should the girl have.
We did it to a marvel. 'Twas a risk,
I know; and I do fear it anger'd God.
For see where we are now. God toucht the sleep
Of my good sister, and made it be her death;
And to the clumsy keeping of my hands
Is put this girl, who knows nothing of evil,
Nothing of sins and wiles and temptations!

NEWBY. It 's a wonderful sort of girl she is, my word!
What, never heard of Old Horns? You must have been,
You and your sister, wonderly afeared.
What, you a proper sweating Methody man,
And let a girl get past you all untaught
That a holy nose should sniff hell everywhere?
You with the lungs to bawl the sinners down
Upon their knees, and fetch up out of their bellies
'I am a worm, I am a worm, Amen,'
As well as Startup can himself! Why, this
Will stick in my throat like a swallowed stickleback;—
'Tis all as good as the adder! What with him
And with your daughter, you're a rare Methody!

SETH [*jumping up*]. Curse you, jibing fool! Put her again
In the same speech as—as the thing in there,
And I'll deal what your wicked head deserves!

[*He suddenly stops threatening, sits down, and puts his face in his hands.*

NEWBY. Why, what the devil can there be between
The adder and your daughter?

SETH [*imploring him*]. Don't say it, man!
O, don't put them together! Ah, Lord, stop him!
[*A short pause. Seth seems to be praying. Newby gazes at him astonisht.*
NEWBY. I'll be bound, this is a strange affair.
So you've not seen your daughter till just now?
SETH. I've seen her; but she never lookt on me.
Yesterday was the first time that I've kist her;
I doubt whether I should have kist her, too.
NEWBY. You're a queer father.
SETH. What else could I do but hide?
I was afraid there might be in my face
Something of evil left; and then the way
I'ld look on her would make her wonder at me.—
How could I look on her and hold away
From thinking on the blood that 's in her heart,
And all there is of me sleeping in her?
But I must see her, or the years would drown me.
There was a little orchard near the house,
With a high wall around; but there a place
Where I could hide and watch the girl's young play
Among the grasses, and her dancing round
The lime-washt apple trees. And I was a man
With poison in his brain, to see her go
So joyously and be so glad with skipping!
When the lent-lilies had begun their gold
In the green sod, the little maid would prink
Before them with a lady's courtesies;
Then, petticoats held up, she'd whirl
Madly delighted childish reels.
How could I tell, whether her wanton games,
Her merry tiptoe gait, were not in truth
Vile words prettily spoken?
And now, Newby, is it not perilous?
[*He looks restlessly towards the hut.*
You'ld best be going among the drinkers now.
NEWBY. Well, I don't envy you your job with her.

But if you'll hear me, tell the lass her feet
Are in the world as on a tight-rope slung
Over the gape and hunger of Hell. At least
That 's what you told your chapel-fellows once;
How they'ld grin to hear of your girl's schooling!

[*He goes off chuckling. It is dusk. Seth goes into the hut and brings out a box, and pores over it, kneeling.*

SETH. They are old wives' tales!—
Is it a worship I am making of you,
My adder? Worshipping the evil thing?
Ay, but what has a beast to do with evil?
They say a snake goes footless from a curse,
And all this crooked zed upon his back
Is a curse written, could we spell it out,
And 'tis the fiend's own spittle in his mouth.
Wives' tales! And yet the man who laughs at them
May be more fooled than he for whom they're truth:
We can't tell what is going on at all.
I have known dawns when the earth, the trees and grasses,
Seem as they'd drifted here out of strange travel,
And all the creatures like the crew of a ship
Late from seeing marvels, and daring not
To speak of them. What 's to be made of that?
And what does my heart make of you, my adder?
Worship!—why not?
Why not worship the evil in this beast
Since, while it has its evil, I am pure?—
That evening, when I knelt in agony
Here, and the Lord relieved me of my sins,
I was like one has suddenly slipt a burden;
And childishly, amazedly, I lookt
To find that bulk of sin: and there, in the box,
Coiled and sleeping, the adder! Then I knew
What God had done for me!
My sins, that could not be destroyed, had past
Into the adder: I was pure as the sun:
There all my evil lay, hid in the adder!

Ay, creeping danger, were you curst before
Or not, is nothing to me: but now I can
Exult over you, greatly exult! For now
Iniquity you are, iniquity,
And my iniquity!
God has anointed with my wrong your head;
And it is mine, this jagged blasphemy
Scribbled along your back: my sins that weigh
Your body flat, my malice in your eyes;
That flickering tongue has spoken in my heart:
O, do you hiss? Ay, that 's my hate of God
Shifted on you, fastened into your mind.
And I do right to worship you, my sins,—
Nay, my salvation! And not I alone,
Adder, am safe by what I see in you!
For while God keeps my sins close shut and bound
In this cold thing, how can they visit her,
My daughter?—

[*It is almost dark. Seth is croucht brooding over the box. Without seeing him, Newby and a girl come in.*

THE GIRL. O, but there 's no one here.
NEWBY. Hullo, where 's he gone?
He won't be long away. Come, sit you down.
GIRL. I've not been out of doors in the dark before.
What are they doing, all these things? Asleep?
I think they're wide awake, for all their quiet,
Waiting for us to leave them. What will they do,
I wonder, when they have the wood to themselves?
NEWBY. Aren't you the lass that 's never heard of the devil?

[*Seth suddenly and angrily leaps up before them.*

SETH. Leave her alone, you old limb of the fiend!
Be off, or by the living God, I'll kill you,
Old wickedness! [*Newby slinks off from his rage.*
[*To the girl.*] What are you doing here?
GIRL. But is there any harm in coming out?
Let me stay with you, father!
SETH [*grim*]. Yes, my girl,

You'll have to stay here now, like it or not.
Under my eyes you're safe.
GIRL. Why, how you quiver!
Tell me, is he a wicked man, that fellow?
SETH. Ay, one of Satan's own. What do you mean
By coming here?
GIRL. I was tired of the house;
And there were thoughts plaguing me like midges.
O, I wish I'd known that was a wicked old man!
SETH [*in fear*]. What? What 's behind this?
GIRL. I might have had
Something from him I want. I suppose, father,
You aren't a wicked man?
SETH [*roughly taking her arm*]. Give me your meaning,
And no more foolery.
GIRL. Why, but that 's it!
I don't know even what my meaning is.
Have you seen flowers grown in a cellar?
SETH. Well?
GIRL. How can they know there is a sun outside?
Yet the pale leaves they have, show they can tell
They're cheated out of something. So am I!
I'm cheated. There 's a brave colour growing somewhere,
And I know naught of it, but that my life
Has been shut off from it, somehow. Father, sins
Are scarlet, are they not?
SETH [*scared*]. Sins? What do you know
Of sins?
GIRL. Why, there again! I know nothing.
I'm like those cellar plants, fooled and cheated.
SETH. Satan has had your ear, girl.
GIRL [*simply*]. No, father;
No one has told me this; I just feel it.
What is this evil, then?
SETH. Darling, don't ask!
GIRL. Do you not know it either? Listen, then.
Once to our door, on a cold and drenching day,

A halt old tramping beggar-woman came,
Her lean form lapt in a shabby duffel cloak
Tattered with going through the weather, stained
With dirt and wear. But when she turned away
I saw that, on the back of her poor cloak,
Was a great patch of scarlet cloth stitcht on;
And as she limped off through the rain, indeed
That old grey cloak had something fine about it,
She'ld have some pride in wearing it! And then,
I overheard my aunt once muttering,
'Our sins are scarlet!'
Scarlet!
That was a wonderful thing for me to hear!
And all at once I seemed to be wearing life
Like a beggarly cheap cloak: and some know how
To clout their drab stuff with a gaudypatch!
Scarlet!
Why, scarlet is for fire; and look how mild
The green and blue and common brown of earth
Seem when the day ends in a scarlet light!
Scarlet! I think it is a kind of power.
And blood is scarlet!—Do you know what I did?
I took a thorn and scored my arm, and watcht
The blood come beading, loving the colour of it.
But then I cried; for what 's the good of blood
So shining scarlet, if life takes nothing from it?
But I had heard my aunt speak of a thing
That can in life be scarlet; and it must be
A thing of power and pride. Why don't I know it?

SETH. O God, is this Thy punishment at last?

[*He looks round wearily. Then, whispering fiercely:*

Into the hut!
Quick, into it, and stay hid! Do you hear me, girl?

[*Seizing a stick and threatening her.*

Enough trifling! In there, till I let you out.

[*The girl yields frightened; he pushes her in, and she is not seen. It is quite dark. A pause. Then the Squire saunters in.*

SQUIRE. Who 's this chap? Burning charcoal, by the smoke.
Is it anyone I know? [*Peering close at Seth.*]
Yes: and your name is somewhere in my mind.

SETH. 'Tis Seth, sir.

SQUIRE. I have you! Seth! The shame of the parish, Seth!
Ah, but you've lapsed since then. Indeed, I know
It is not everyone can keep it up:
I'll not reproach you. I suppose you are
Still the reformed lecher? And do you still
Strictly ride your flesh with a martingale?

SETH [*giggling*]. Good even, sir.
Yes, thank you, sir, I'm doing pretty well.

SQUIRE. Let 's talk a little: for what you were you are,
However sadly changed, and so we're equals:
Lechery is the one thing makes men equal.
So come, man to man, lecher to lecher,
Let us be honest—no one can overhear—
Let 's have it out. Is it worth it, Seth?
Ay, there 's the point for both of us. For me,
Is it worth while keeping hard at the game?
And then, for you, quite on the contrary,
Is it worth while to switch yourself from one
Simply to fiddle in another game?

SETH. A game? Ha, ha! That 's good, sir! Yes, a game!

SQUIRE. Yes, but I reckon you're no happier
In your new game than I am in my old.
So here 's the point: is your religion worth
To you more than my lechery 's worth to me?
I'll tell you what I think, Seth.
They're both worth mighty little, mighty little:
They've both the worth of diseases,—no, they're both
A living man's misery about death.—
Well, we can't help ourselves. To every man
His own game; a man's pleasure is his fate.
But I shan't follow you: for in your style
There 's this offends me. If there 's a thing I hate
It is these travelling menageries:

To see a couple of rusty string-halt geldings
Tugging a square-walled cover'd truck through mud,
And to know that, crampt within that clumsy waggon,
Lumbering, jolting, unlit, airless,—lie
Lions, Sahara lions!—And in you
Once there were lions, Seth, the lions of sin;
Mangy, perhaps, but still—lionish voices.
And now you've shut your sins up in a box—

SETH [*startled*]. A box?

SQUIRE. Yes, in a dirty travelling cage;
You sit on the shafts, and a miserable gelding
You call religion, draws you through the world;
A creaking, groaning pace! And after you
You drag, lockt in a cruel narrow den,
Those sins had such a free life in you once.
Seth, I could never do that!—Something there was
The keeper told me about you. Was it poaching?
No, no;
The jackals are all penned up with the lions.
What was it now? I laughed at it. Ah, yes.
They say you've got your daughter back.

SETH. Who? I?
I have no daughter, sir.

SQUIRE. What, is she dead?

SETH. I mean she does not live with me, you know.
My sister keeps her; a strong-minded woman:
Won't let me see the girl.

SQUIRE. Surely I heard
Your sister *is* dead.

SETH. O no! There 's a mistake!
I saw her Tuesday last—O quite alive.

SQUIRE [*yawning*]. So am I, God be curst.—Seth, I can feel
Your eyes glooming upon me through the darkness.
What, you, the leaky pipkin that has lost,
Through flaws, the burning liquor trusted to you,
You will be pitying me, a vessel sound
And perfect, that has never lost a drop

Of the bright wrathful wine I am charged to carry?
What 's this thin vinegar that is in you now,
The cracks of you caulked with charitable clay,
That makes you dare be proud above me,—me
Brimmed with the ancient vintage I have kept
Faithfully mellowing, till I am soaked through
With the power of it, with the scarlet fire of it?

[*The girl comes out of the hut.*

A girl! A young girl!—
My Satan, you begin to weary me.
The skill 's too noticeable; you would catch me
Easier, if you fumbled a few tricks.—
—Well, who are you this time?

GIRL. I am his daughter.

SQUIRE. Aha! Let 's have a look at you.

[*He strikes a match and studies her face.*

Seth, Seth,
Would you have kept this from me? She 's the sort
One dreams of. But it always comes to this:
Religion takes all comradeship from a man.
His daughter, are you? Then I hope you are
The daughter of his wickedness;—that should make you
Full of sin as a hive is full of honey.

GIRL. I cannot say, sir; for I don't know at all
What sin may be. But I know well there is
Something sealed up within me,—in my heart,
I think; and it is troubling for its freedom.

SQUIRE. Very likely; and I should say will still
Go on kicking and bothering in your heart
Unless you help it out. Then, you will find,
The grub will hatch into that notable fly—
Naughtiness!

GIRL. You speak kindly; will you not help me?
If you saw the Morecambe tide chase a lame man,
You on a horse, would you not give him help?
I am a kind of cripple; and I loathe
The plight I'm in. Lift me out of it!

Do let me coax you. Tell me about sin!—
For I will get to know.

SQUIRE. Are you a fool,
Or making a fool of me?

GIRL. It 's I've been fooled.

SQUIRE. Seth, you don't seem to be amused at this.

GIRL. I heard you say the word; scarlet, you said;
There is something in you that you feel like scarlet.
Is that not sin? So tell me what sin is.

SQUIRE. No, no, no, no! Satan, it will not do.
The show runs far too smoothly,—far too like
What my desires expect. Somehow, at last
Mere skill becomes disgusting. Even a cook
Who gives me always everything I want
Turns out an odious person. So, my dear,
You come so apt, just as my hunger woke,
And are so thoroughly spiced with what I want,
That I—will bid you a good night.

GIRL. O, sir,
You will not learn me this?

SQUIRE. Why, no, not now;
But I dare say the mood will change: we'll try
Some day, if we can find out what sin is.

[*He looks at her a moment, and then goes abruptly.*

GIRL [*dancing round the stack*]:
O life of mine, I shall love you yet:
We shall be changed, my life and I.
Dancing will no more be a game
Played to pretend we're hearing a tune.
There will be singing of tunes enough,
To make us dance when we know it not:
They'll be living within us, the tunes,
Water of brooks in spring for happiness,
Scarlet fire for power and pride.

SETH [*seizing her by the arm as she passes him*]:
Do you see that stack?

GIRL [*breathless*]. It's only a pile of wood.

SETH. Ay, in the dark, that 's what it seems; but listen!
Within it there 's a heart, a smouldering heart,—
Fire is smothered there.
GIRL. And smothered in me.
SETH. And I will keep it so! For look, if I
Broke through the sheathing turf and thatch of boughs,
And left it open, the hidden fire would come
Fiercely darting out on us, turning the whole
Stack, and the whole of the woods, to bellowing flame,
No one could quench.
GIRL [*breaking away*]. And I shall be alive,
Alive in the manner of scarlet and golden flame.
SETH [*gripping her again*]:
Listen,—my father, climbing on a stack
Like this one, to be tending it, trod through
The turf and branches, and the fire caught him
And charred him to the knees. Girl, there are hearts,
Unsafe as heaps of dried wood, and within
Mined by eating fires. And I, your father,
Worse than my father fared; for into the hot
Heart of my heart I broke, and I was caught,
The whole of me, in the blazing rage of hell.
And as my heart is, so is yours; a thing
To choke and stifle; or, once set it free,
The flaming of your heart will seize you and
Everlastingly burn you.
GIRL. This is talk
I can make nothing of. Who would refuse
A splendid thing? I know there is a power
Can make my life seem as if it were scarlet.
And it is like to fire, you say. Why, then,
That is the splendour I have dreamt about;
What should I do refusing it? What gain
Choking it down, but the old dull want I have?
SETH. Watch now, while I kick a hole in the stack.
Do you mark the glowing danger, the red lust
Biding within? See, all the dark 's ashamed

That such hot mischief lights it up. A sod
Plugs the hole now; but had I left it open,
The stack were gone in a ravage of wild flame.
You've lookt into your heart now: are you not feared?
GIRL. I say, I can make nothing of this. My heart?
Is my heart stored with such a glowing light?
And I must be afraid of it? I will not!
But if this power is in me, it shall burn
To freedom, yes, and fill me with the burning.
SETH. O girl of mine, if you knew how I loved you!
Promise me now, you won't go near the Squire.
GIRL. Why not?
SETH. Darling, believe me! O, he would
Treat you fiendishly,—God, and laugh to do it!
GIRL. Father, let 's have this out. What right have you
To cheat me of a knowledge all folks have?
Is it for sin that my heart so desires?
SETH. It cannot be that; no, it cannot be that.
GIRL. So then what harm in finding what sin is?
SETH. Yes, it is sin you want! But stifle it.
GIRL. And why? And why? You cannot show me that.
I tell you I mean to find this out!
SETH [*letting her go and standing bemused*]:
What do I, fighting with the evil heart
She has from me? If God has any mercy
He'll fight it down in her now, once and for ever.—
You'ld know what sin is? Well, I can tell you.
GIRL. You can, father?
SETH. The very spirit of sin
I can show you; for I have it with me.
Show it you? You can handle it, play with it.
GIRL. Where have you got it?
SETH. Here, in the midst of us.
GIRL. 'Tis something I can touch?
SETH. Come you and try.
Bend down. Do you see?—It is in here I keep it.
Undo the sneck of the lid, put in your hands,

And grope, search it thoroughly.

GIRL. In this box?

SETH [*over her*]. Lord, I perceive you will not let my sins
Go past her. There is no escape for her
But through my torments; but, O God, my sins
Will come too strong upon her; and already
Her blind heart fills with longing for my evil.
Give her the whole of it now, O Lord my God!
Satisfy all her longing at once; and let
The evil which her hands discover, Lord,
Be death!

[*She cries out.*

GIRL. Ah, it is wet,—no, but how cold!
O, I am bitten, father. There is some anger
Hid in your box. And it has bitten me.

SETH. Show me. Let 's have some light.

[*He makes a small hole in the stack. The red glare again leaps out.*

Ay, on the wrist.
Both fangs right on a vein. They must have sunk
Up to the gums in her flesh.

GIRL. Shall I suck the bite?

SETH [*seizing her arm*]. No need: sit down by me, and keep you quiet.
How does your arm feel?

GIRL. Strangely: very numb
And as if 'twere swoln.

SETH. Cold?

GIRL. Icy: is it all right?

SETH. All right, darling.

GIRL [*struggling a little*]. Why must you hold my arm?

SETH. 'Tis better so. Bide you still awhile.—
Very soon it will be in the heart of her.

[*He plugs up the hole in the stack. Darkness.*]

CURTAIN.

THE STAIRCASE

A small room in an empty cottage, without furniture. Stone floor; dirty ragged paper on walls. The room is littered with bits of sawn wood, shavings, tools; a joiner's frail lies on the floor. Door to the open air on right; in the back wall an old kitchen range, with a good fire burning. A young joiner is alone in the room; he has been putting in a new staircase, which is all but finished; the new wood, clean and white, shows up amid the dingy room.

The JOINER [*looking at his work: in a sort of chant*].

Hammer and nails, gimlet and screws,
Bradawl, chisel, mallet and plane,
A will to work, and health in my thews,
And season'd wood of a good clean grain
Shaping under my hands and skill,
And obeying my master-will . . .

[*Speaking*]

And I alone: that 's the best of it here.—
These book-read folks won't beat that song of mine,
I warrant. I'll have a right tune for it some day:
Hammer and nails, gimlet and screws,
Bradawl, chisel, mallet and plane,
A will to work . . .

[*The outer door is pusht open, and a woman comes in, tired and worn, wet through, with a long shabby cloak on her. She stands a moment gazing round the room.*

WOMAN. Alone?
Was it you buzzing to yourself I heard?
Grumbling for company?

[*The young man stares at her and answers mechanically.*

JOINER. For company? I'ld liever keep to myself.
WOMAN. Dreaming aloud, then?—Ay, cleverest thing
To do against the world, for sure, is dreaming.
But it needs shelter.—Well, go on dreaming.

I'll borrow your warmth awhile; the drench of the rain
Is dribbling down my skin inside my clothes
Cold as worms.

[*She sits by the fire, opens her cloak, and shows she is holding a baby. She begins to suckle it.*

JOINER. You've got a baby!

WOMAN. Well done, young man!
You know a thing or two: a baby it is.—
Finish your job, and I'll keep on at mine.

JOINER. I'm all but done here now.

WOMAN. What were you at?

JOINER. Framing the new stairs. Are you travelling?

WOMAN. Travelling and travelling; still walking.

JOINER. A strange place for you to be walking, here.

WOMAN. I'll swear to that: strange and miserable.
Not such another road in Christendom
For wind that 's carrying a cruel rain
To get the better of your heart.

JOINER. I mean,
The road goes nowhere, but to these few huts
That stick against the hillside.

WOMAN. I know that—
Now I am here I know it.—But at least
The road has brought me to your fire. Young man,
Why do you stare so? Do you know my face?
You don't belong here?

JOINER. Five miles off I live.

WOMAN. Ah . . . [*Her talk seems meant to cover some feeling.*]
They are pretty work, your stairs:
They look too white in this curst filthy room;
Like a mind where the dirty world has lived and slept,
But still remembering in midst of the soil
Some childish morning spent in games and laughter
Under a blowing orchard.—[*As he is still silent.*]
Ay, queer to find fresh work in such a place.
Is the house set then to a new-comer?
Who will first climb your stairs? A girl, maybe,

Upon her wedding night. She'll slip away
From off her husband's knees, and dance up swift,
Giggling shy and happily afraid,
And the house falls quiet of their talk; and then
The old joists creak as she moves in her undressing;
Then the lad slinks up after, like a robber.

JOINER. It 's strange! A little while before you came,
It was with just that fancy I was idling.

WOMAN. I warrant, you yourself were the lad, then.

JOINER [*simply*]. Yes.

WOMAN. And the girl?

JOINER. I don't know—rightly—

WOMAN. Which to choose?

JOINER. O long ago I made my choice: and yet—
I have not seen her.

WOMAN [*after a little pause*]. I could dream once myself.—
[*Then, amused at his simplicity:*
But will you know her? What would you say if I
Went up those stairs of yours?

JOINER [*startled, staring at her*]. You? You?
I did not think you were putting fun upon me.

WOMAN [*looking back at him with amused bitterness*].
Indeed, you are in the right:
I am naught to visit a young man's dreams.
But I was gibing at myself, not you:
I mind my manners: beggars thrive by them.

JOINER [*gently*]. Are you begging your way?

WOMAN. Yes; I want food.

JOINER. If you'll come home with me—

WOMAN. Five miles away!
No, I will warm myself, and something dry
The heavy moisture that has made my skirts
Rasp the skin off my ankles.—Were the old stairs
Rotten past mending?

JOINER. Crumbling into holes.
No nature left in the wood but must and dry-rot:
I knockt 'em into powder. The old man,

Who lived here by himself, was coming down,
And caught his heel at top; the tread broke through,
Tript his footing—

WOMAN [*repressing eagerness*]. And he hurt himself?

JOINER. Smasht his wicked old back-bone.

WOMAN. Why, you seem
To hate the man.

JOINER. A gallows snarling tyke.

WOMAN. What had you against him?

JOINER. He would have known what
If I'd had chance to bring his wicked blood
Blushing about his ears.

WOMAN. There 's a bold fellow;
To wish he could have boxt an old man's ears!

JOINER. No; but I would have had such words for him,
His wizened heart had been ashamed.

WOMAN. Why, then,
Happen the old man might have boxt your ears!

JOINER. Ay, have your game with me: but if he'd been
A giant with a rage like a burning demon's,
I would have faced his wildness.

WOMAN. Well, he 's dead,
And talk 's an easy thing. But I've heard tell—
For on the road, young man, your ears find out
Noises from every corner in the land—
I've heard he was a terrible fierce old fellow.

JOINER. Likely enough.
You'ld hear, too, of the scoundrel thing he did
Upon his daughter: you could scarce miss that;
The villainous sound of it must be ranging still.

WOMAN. But what seems loud to you among these hills,
And a rough splash in a quiet creek of life,
Will hardly push a little shaking whisper
Into the air of the broad troubled world.—
Was it a pretty wench?

JOINER. Why, you'ld be bound,
If she were here, to think there 's none in all

The room of the land could show their beauty off,
But only as lighting matches in the sun.

WOMAN. I would be bound to think so!

JOINER. Yes: she'ld come,
Like you, suppose now, out of the windy rain;
She'ld have been tussling with its force against her
Like a young girl laughing with her brother
Because he plays mock-ruffian; and the game
Would shine still in her eyes as she came in;
And she'ld be walking lightly with the glee
Would seem to sing in her body, all so thrilled
From the wind's pouring through her dress. It would
Be strange to see her, a strange and lovely thing
To see her coming back here after all.

WOMAN [*laughing*]. This is a wonder! And so she 's your fancy,
The girl so friendly to your loneliness!
I'll hurt myself with laughing! This is the girl
Who slipt away from whispering in the firelight
To run with pretty laughter up your stairs?

JOINER. Well, if she is?

WOMAN. Isn't it queer you know
Just how the girl would look?

JOINER. I'ld swear to her!

WOMAN. And it 's a minute gone, you said your eyes
Had never lived upon her!—

JOINER. You've made me a fool now, I suppose. You're welcome.
But I was bound to talk so, being so long
Here in the house, that somehow must, I'm sure,
Remember her—the timber and the stone
That felt the sound of her laughter and her ways—

WOMAN. O let 's have little of that.—Why did you play
This lying game on me?

JOINER [*amazed*]. Why did I play—?

WOMAN [*standing up*]. Lies! Lies! What were all your lies for?

JOINER [*catching her anger*]. How will a roadster know the lies from truth,

Who has to lie for her eating, lie for her lodging,
And the whole gear of her life is lies?

WOMAN. It 's true:
We lie for needs: you for a fleering scoff.

JOINER. You've had no harm from me; and let your tongue
Make sure of this, so long as we're in talk:
This girl, and the way the thought of her has grown
Within my brain—O, like rivers pouring
Full from the flooded hills,—

WOMAN. You'll lose yourself
Bragging her up so handsome; I'll help you out:
This is the thing you mean?—
It would be like a hand with grimy fingers
Meddling in the fine make of a clock, to let
Talk common as mine touch your fancying
That goes so smooth and chimes to you so dainty.
Well, I'll believe 'tis fancies, and not lies:
But I must have my laugh at them.

JOINER. Yes, laugh, laugh;
It 's pretty joking.—There 's a girl grows up
Beautiful and sweet hearted: and there comes
A rogue sneaking into her innocence,
Wheedling and living there; and she, dear fool,
Comforting him; and he blabbing abroad
The simple way her love had askt him in.

WOMAN. Did he do that?

JOINER. Yes, such a blackguard he was.
But how would a girl so happy know his mind
Was just a muddy puddle?—She'ld only see
The face of her own love there, looking back.—

WOMAN. The pitiful fool. Ah, but it 's fools you like.

JOINER. You'ld like the folk who went about to stir
That wild brute of anger in her father,
And pitcht their buzzing jeers just loud enough
To startle it, and make it savage her.
They quickly had him crazed. Soon as he hears
The village sniggering its dirty gossip,

And knows his daughter 's come to trouble and danger—
WOMAN. Through being a pitiful fool—
JOINER. He thrashes her,
Thrashes her, and rails her out of the house,
Childing as she was: and heavily
To trudge after the slinking runagate
Who fouled her, the poor lass must go alone.—
Five years ago it would be. O, if I'd heard,
She need not have gone crying into hiding!
And lightly I learnt the tale of it all at first:
But it slipt over my mind like a noosed wire
That snares a rabbit's neck, and the peg fails,
And puss goes free: the gin has not left go,
But tightens still and cankers into her life.
Just so the story of how they shamed the girl
Clung like a loop of wire and gnawed its hold
Upon my mind: whenever I work alone,
I'm thinking of the world breaking her spirit,
And turning into misery the heart
That was so blithe and singing.
Well, here 's for you to laugh at. Why don't you laugh?
WOMAN. I'm thinking of that old man, left alone
With shame upon his age, and dying alone.
JOINER. And she has none to think of her but me!
Even the thought of kindness keeps itself
Safe from a life like hers, as rats will jump
In harbour from a boat fierce weather has strained.
WOMAN. Somebody told you that too?—
You have the brave life, always among notions!
But you're not fair to rats. What have they done
That you should liken them to charity?
This would be better: Vermin crawling out
From the clothes of a beggar's corpse, soon as they feel
The warmth of their lodging chill. I have not lived
In notions, but in seeing things; that 's one:
Cold morning, a white road, and at the side
A tramp lies dead of starving, and all round him . . .

Ugh! [*Her voice begins to accuse him.*]
And I've a mind to stop you cockering
Your halfling blood. What right have you to be
So brave and comfortable with your dreams
Of that lost fool—you always in a house—
While she, the truth of them, goes broad awake
In agony?

JOINER. Wouldn't I do her all
The good a man can think of? Why must you gibe?
It 's only that she 's gone, she 's never heard of.

WOMAN. She might come back.

JOINER. Be sure I'll know of it.

WOMAN. Yes, I believe you will.
Then what will you do with her?

JOINER. What 's that to you?

WOMAN. Why, I should know what you will do with me.
Come now; you must have thought it out.

JOINER. With you?
You mean . . . ? Are you for fooling me again?

WOMAN. And bitter fooling now. I am the girl.

JOINER. You're not. You can't be. Often I've heard tell—

WOMAN. Of pretty looks and laughing ways. Five years
Of following a tramping labourer
Will alter that. This baby 's not the first,
The other two are dead. And I've been chapt,
And I've been tired out, and clemm'd and burnt
With walking through the winds and the hot days;
It 's just a frame I am beneath my clothes.
You made your fancy of my spirit breaking;
The fancy would have been too wise to live
If it had heeded how my body fared
Out there on the road, ageing and grieving.—
Wonderful, isn't it, how dreams come true?

JOINER. You're clever with your wiles. You've tript me up
Once already; but I'm not caught this time.

WOMAN. Ay, but you are; you're trapt and floundering.
Listen: I'll prove myself. What would bring me here?

The road ends in the nowhere of the hills;
A blind man's feet could tell that from the ruts,
And the sward that 's all across it. Why should I come
Such an unlikely way, with hunger on me
No longer anguish, but a load, a load?
I came to find my father.—O my pride
I've eaten long since; and poor meat it was,
No stay in it for me or for my bairn.—
I thought my dad might pay a shilling or two
For the sight of me still in my misery;
Or maybe only a morsel; that would do—
Stop me starving my baby. Nowhere else
Dare we be asking, or chance showing ourselves;
For we go cunning as stoats, my man and I:
Anyone looking at us may be the law.

JOINER. You're escaping the law?—It was not you,
I'll vow, that did the wrong.

WOMAN. I did my share.
You mind these rick-fires, kept the nights aglow
For near a week, until the rain set in?—
It might have been the nights they have in the north
Among the foundries, where they smelt the iron,
And furnaces keep glaring at the clouds
Till it 's like red-hot weather above the darkness.—
I reckon we had you watching the sky! Each night
A blazing rick, ten or twelve miles from the last!—
He swore he'ld rouse the land. No one at all
Would give us jobs—a tramp and his homeless doxy.
And a queer time I had with him and his fists;
Till the rage seemed to addle in his brain,
And he could think of naught but stacks to fire.
But he'll be tried for blood as well as burning,
If it 's the truth we heard. A shippen caught
And sent the blaze along its thatch to the house;
And in the scare there was a child forgot
That slept alone in the attic.—Well, my boy
Is like to be clemm'd for his death: it 's all one,

Hunger and cold, or fire.—I hope the lad
Was stifled first, though; I've been praying that.

JOINER. And it 's you telling me this, as calm as news
Of prices at the market!

WOMAN. Now do you see?
I've put myself clean into your mercy.
Would I have riskt your mind, without I were
Your own fine dream rousing you into daylight?—
This takes you down from your fool'd life, I think!
So will you give us up, my man and I?
He 's known for his talk: there'll be a cry abroad
After us, I'll be bound.—You'll not, I know;
Because I am your lovely dream come true.—
Surely 'tis time you were pleased.

JOINER. O let me be!
Give me a little while to breathe myself.

WOMAN. Indeed
It goes up hill, out of a dream to truth.
But I've come down a little; I thought to find
My old angry father; and I find you!—
Now, are we right yet? Or shall I tell you where
The stairs were rotted worst?—Third from top:
Half of it flimsy and soft as blanket, half
Gaping open.

JOINER. Ay, there the old brute tript.

WOMAN. And with him died our last poor chance of food.
We'd best be off now, baby. [*But she makes no attempt to go. A short pause; then she laughs.*

JOINER. Will you forgive me?

WOMAN. What, for making me
Your fancy game?—I've had worse things to carry.

JOINER. O make an end of that talk!—It 's the truth
I have at last, after all my dreaming.

WOMAN. I'll lay, it seems like when they scorch a pig
After a killing!—Rubbish of straw and waste
Flares high and bold in a wind of golden flame
And streaking sparks—a young man's mind of fancies.

Then 'tis a mound of smoulder, crumbling in
To show parcht awkward trotters sticking up,
Flap ears and senseless snouted head, and all
The poor pig's blacken'd hulk: and there 's the truth
Was hid inside a young man's burning dreams!—
Well, I am not the sop I was; there is
A dry side to me now. So I'll be kind
And take the truth I am out of your sight.

JOINER. I let you go? You think that 's likely yet?

WOMAN [*uneasy*]. Are you for doing like the fool shown up
Who braves his folly out by staying in it?

JOINER. You shall stay in it, too!—It goes up hill,
You said, the way out of my dream; up hill
And the sun behind the hill! And now I've climbed
Where nothing stops the light, not even dreams.
We'll not get higher than this, either of us.
If we can't hold now to our meeting here,
Here on the top of life, where every side
Is a slope falling, 'tis for both of us,
From this on, going downward into shadows,
Never again to be in sight or hail.

WOMAN. If I'm not gone quickly, we're both in danger.

JOINER. Will you not dare believe my meaning?

WOMAN. No.——
I'll only think, 'Suppose, suppose he meant it!'—

JOINER. Why, we're awake, and the dream still crying aloud!

WOMAN. You close your mind to it. No hurt in dreams:
But this that sounds so drawing—safer would be
A viper hissing. 'Tis the truth of the world
Persuading you to come into its reach.

JOINER. And the sound 's drawing you!

WOMAN. O, I must hear
Everything I have lost—everything
That is not the old cunning torturer,
The world's merciless truth!—You'ld never keep me
Safe from the world in hiding of your dreams;

The world would come for me, and strike you there.
I to be looking for a dream again,
And you for truth to please you like your dreams——
It would be a wild-hearted game to play!

JOINER. I did not mean it for a game, the while
I've been as good to my mind as to the steel
I work with, all for the sake of finding you:
Rusted metal, you know, may be wrought clean
As glass, but the rust lies within, for ever
Spoiling the finest temper.

WOMAN. Can you not see
The rust of the world has eaten to my heart?

JOINER. Can you not see that my main life has been
Knowing of you held by the handling world
All as it likes, and I the one to wring
The vile grasp off from you? Don't make my life
Break its promise to me, so nearly kept!—
I have gone hungry for this hour.

WOMAN. And I,
Have I not hunger'd? Thank your God you kept
Your hunger empty. I famisht, and was fed
On filthy poison, worse than being starved.
—I never thought to have a mind again
That need not be ashamed of being alive!—
You do not mean I should—love you?

JOINER. No, no;
We are not bargaining.

WOMAN. I doubt I could not,
Even if I were wishing to.—
Listen to me. Think God is eyeing you,
And tell me fairly, 'tis a man's set mind
You have to—help me.

JOINER. I'll make you another life!
'Tis your say now.

WOMAN. Sometimes it might be,
In the hot dusty drouth of afternoon,
We'ld pass a byre, and hear the milkers chat,—

Girls laughing,—and spirted milk ring in the cans.
Or plodding stupidly on in windy dark,
Our steps would sound against a cottage wall
Sleeping beside the lane: I'ld lean on it;
Warmth would be in it; I'ld think of a drowsy fire
Inside the house, and hear the crickets chime.——
Young man, I'll risk you! Let us be off, quick,
Else he'll be coming in on us.

JOINER. He? Who?

WOMAN. The man that was my man.

JOINER. He 's nothing now.

WOMAN. He was my man.

JOINER. No need to think of him.
I've naught to say but—thank you.

WOMAN. Thank me?

JOINER. Yes!
Now I've a thing to do at last.

WOMAN. But you,
Never you look to have me thanking you;
For that might set me telling what I've been,
The shame I have been, the dirt!—You must not know it.
[*With a gesture.*] O but if there is something in the world
That can do good, and listens when 'tis called,
I shall be asking it to stay with you;
You have made room for me where never again
I thought to live.—It goes beyond my thanks.

JOINER. There 's stumbling outside, coming up the path.

WOMAN. We should have gone before this!—'Tis my man.

[*The Tramp comes in*

TRAMP. Now where 's the food?

WOMAN. My father 's dead, they tell me.

TRAMP. I don't want your father; I'm for eating.
You said there'ld be food here.

WOMAN. 'Tis not my fault;
How could I know if he were gone or living?

TRAMP. O, you keep on like a parrot. Food 's the thing.

WOMAN. A thing you'll have to walk some further for.

TRAMP. Why did you turn us here? To play hot-cockles
Safe with a lad?
JOINER [*to the Woman*]. You're not to talk with him.
TRAMP. Not talk?—She'll have to talk about the food
She made out we'ld be having here. Where is it?
WOMAN. Are you fuddled? There 's none here.
TRAMP. None, by God!
Not a bite?
WOMAN. Not a bite.
TRAMP [*going towards her*]. Then take your lesson!
You'll feel my ten commandments now: you'll learn
The way of them by heart.
[*The Woman, standing up, instinctively picks up the baby and holds it as her protection.*
Lay the brat down!
Put down that bastard, or he'll grow up lame
As you'll be when I've done you.
[*She lays the baby down and faces him.*
Ay, that 's wiser:
You mind what came of that trick once?—And now
I'll twinge your arm till it crackles.
WOMAN. No, not that!
JOINER. I've payed out rope enough. I'll fasten it now
Taut, and you've hung yourself.—Round on your heels
And out of doors!
TRAMP. This isn't your ado;
Keep out.
JOINER. You march now: I'll not bid you again.
TRAMP. Have I to down you first before I tan
My woman? Do you call that fair? It 's low.
I'm hunger-starved and done—just enough heart
Left in me for lathering her; and you
Push in, you with your belly crammed and good:
It 's low! Stand off and be an Englishman.
JOINER. You're too long standing. Will you have your teeth
So quaked in your head, you'll never chew again
Happily? Off out of this!

TRAMP [*half whimpering with weakness and anger*].
Mate, fair play.
Too bad it is. She cheats me of a meal
And should be taught right. Ay, and you'ld have seen,
If she had kept her word and found me meat,
I am a man when I'm fed could do for you
And lick her finely as well out of her lies:
A job for each hand that. But now—
There 's nothing fair in the world, after this!
JOINER. You'll have it then?
TRAMP [*in a rage*]. And empty as I be
I'll match you: win or lose, she'll pay me for it
When we're alone.
WOMAN [*looking out through the open door*]. Have you been showing yourself?
TRAMP [*apprehensive at once*]. What is it now?
WOMAN. Three men, mighty cautious,
And almost here.
TRAMP. They'll not find me. [*Making for the door.*]
WOMAN. You fool,
They're right in front.
TRAMP. You bitch, you have me trapt!
O I will need to go into hard training
If I'm to pay you the fair price for this!
WOMAN. Ay, shout to them 'Here 's your man!'
TRAMP. What will I do?—
Up the stairs and out of a window and off,
That 's my road. [*He goes upstairs.*]
WOMAN. There 's the first to take your stairs!
JOINER. And a good use for them; it quits us of him.
[*Three Men come in*—1, 2, & 3.]
1. Ay, there he is!
2. The man!
3. The very man!
I markt him well, nosing the taproom whiff
Beside the door, and fearing to go in.
1. You see his cunning?

2. Why, he 's washt his face!
3. 'Tis that! I thought he lookt another man!
1. But not this way you'll put off eyes like ours.
WOMAN. O will they take him?—I'd not plotted that!
JOINER. Ay, the thing plans itself, once we can hold
Their crazy pother.
WOMAN. Keep them blundering
A while, a little while!
2. We'll have to go
Carefully about him.
3. Ay, 'tis a face
With gallows in it. When I saw him leant
Beside the taproom door, with his eyes cadging,
I thought, 'There 's a slaughtering visnomy!'
1. I've no notion at all of seeing him hanged
For murdering me.
2. Young fellow, own to yourself!
You're the rick-burner.
3. Ay, and he burnt a lad.
JOINER. Do hold your blathering a bit and hear me.
Or if you won't, see this. [*Holding up a hammer.*
1. He means battery!
2. Dreadful things can be done with a hammer.
3. When he
That uses it is wild and knows the way
Through your skull and into your brain.
JOINER. Do stop!
I am the joiner here. Yonder 's my work,
The staircase. And the man you wanted has bolted
Up to the loft, and you have him caged and safe.
1. Are there weapons upstairs?
JOINER. Go on and take him.
The room 's bare boards and walls, and he 's as weak
With famishing as a fly.
2. Well, if you're sure
You're not the man——
3. No, no; I saw right off

He had the look of someone else.

1 [*Marshalling them at the staircase*]. Now for it!

2. Mind the reward that 's posted for him!

3. Charge!

[*They rush up the stairs.*

JOINER. This falls out well. Here 's an easy riddance,
And the way smooth from here.

WOMAN. Were you not told
To break out larger windows in the attics?
They're cruel small!

JOINER. Cruel and small indeed
To one who thinks of squeezing his escape
Through any of them.—But I can hear they have him.

[*The three men come down with the Tramp.*

1. The man for certain this time.

TRAMP. Copt! copt!

WOMAN. We couldn't flee for ever. Is it far,
The way to the jail? They'll give us food there, likely.

2 [*to the Woman*]. What, are you coming too?

WOMAN. Yes, I'm coming.

3. Were you in with his burnings?

WOMAN. They are mine
As much as his. I screened his light from draughts.

JOINER. He made her do it!—[*to the Woman*] There's no need for this!

TRAMP. Copt is the word!

WOMAN. And I am glad it 's over.

JOINER. It 's over right enough; the whole black time
Is over now. Must you see him to jail?
How can you make your duty such a thing?

WOMAN. You'll never want a flatterer, young man,
Not while your own tongue lives. Who said I made
Going with him my duty?

1. Settle your mind
And choose your man, missis: come on or stay.

WOMAN. And you talk civil, mister! Choose my man!

JOINER [*to the Tramp*]. You will not drag her with you?

WOMAN. O, you have
Queer sense in you! Who 's dragging me at all?

JOINER [*to the Tramp*]. Have you not had enough of injuring her?
Go off from her at last!

TRAMP. Copt! Fair copt!

WOMAN. Thank you for lending me your fire, young man.
[*To the men.*] Not budging yet? [*They begin to go out.*
Bless my wits, I was leaving you the brat!
Is it still raining? I must lap him well:
There is a trouble in his breath already.

[*When the Joiner is left alone and the door closed, the curtain comes down.*

THE DESERTER

In front of a cottage in the country. Early morning. The door of the cottage opens and several men and women come out; they stand talking on the garden path, before they disperse.

1ST WOMAN. Why, it 's bright morning!
1ST MAN. And a fresh air 'tis!
2ND WOMAN. Like coming out of a tunnel—such a noise
The night has been.
1ST WOMAN. And such a stifle of folk!
My head 's bewilder'd.
1ST MAN. Wash you in the dew,
The same as when you were a young thing.
1ST WOMAN. Nay!
I've all my age just now, and a deal more:
As likely to be skittish as if I'd seen
My own time dated in the almanac,
As settled as the assizes.
2ND MAN [*a very old man*]. Well, what a mood
For a fine morning!—You keep too soft a heart,
A heart like dough, no sad affair can touch
Without it pinches. You should have a heart
Like mine, crisp as a quartern loaf new-baked
With the warmth lively in it—to feel the morn
Kindle your senses again after you've seen
Another fellow's candle-light snufft out.
1ST WOMAN. Well, I'm just daunted, when I've seen death busy.
2ND MAN. And we left still alive to smell the air!—
Never a death now, but I feel as if
It took a parcel of years from off my back:
I'll have a spine like a sapling soon.—My word,
This garden favours pinks! Better than mine!
Look what a flourish of pinks!
2ND WOMAN. When I'm to die,

I'll not have windows closed and a blinded room;
I'll have the morning blow right in on me,
And have some gleam of green things in my eyes.
You mind, all of you: else I'll die so loud,
Peter's noise would be a buzzing to it.

1ST WOMAN. And I'll not have my dying day a show
For all the swarming neighbours.

2ND MAN [*the old one*]. I'll be there:
I'll give you a send-off.

1ST WOMAN. You old jackal!
You'll have your proper gait by then; you'll be
Going about four-footed.

1ST MAN. You won't take,
We'll hope, missis, such a wild way of dying
As Peter took; there'll be no call for us
To come and manage you.

3RD MAN. I thought, one while,
He'ld fight us down.

1ST MAN. He gave my neck a wrench
Will keep me minding him all day, poor man;—
Specially as 'tis hoeing turnips for me.

2ND WOMAN. I had my mind made up and my skirts gathered
To clear the stairs in a jump, and chance my legs,
When he seemed freeing himself: I never saw
Such vengeance in a man's eyes.

1ST MAN. Ay, you mean
The fit he had of taking Turpin's face
For the Kayser looking in on him? Indeed,
He bounded under the clothes same as a salmon
Leaping a waterfall.

1ST WOMAN. Anyone would suppose
His glare was on some great marauding face,
The picture of foreign wickedness and murder,
He did take Turpin's looks to heart so bad.
Yet it 's a homely make of face; you'ld say,
Surely, if there 's plain English anywhere,
It 's Turpin's face.

3RD MAN [*Turpin*]. Never you mind my looks.
1ST MAN. Peter minded them, worse than a slug minds salt:
A glance of you made him a foaming man.
'I'll give you Belgium,' says he: and I'm sure
He'ld have had Turpin's face ript from his head
If I'd been slack a jiffy.
2ND WOMAN. Then 'twas hell:
Hell was under the bedstead, burning for him.
1ST WOMAN. You could nigh see the flames come groping up,
He dodged them so.
2ND MAN [*the old one*]. But what is hell for him now,
Is thinking of us alive with the sun in our eyes,
And air and the taste of morning in our mouths;
And me noting the larkspurs and the lupins,
And how I beat him there, for all his pinks
Do wonders—thinking of this and knowing himself
A dead thing from now on:—that 's hell, I'm sure!
1ST MAN. He ought not to have gone so quick by rights;
The doctor gave him longer.
3RD MAN. He'ld never bide
By doctor's talk. 'No drink'—that was the word:
But Peter'ld not be meddled with, not he.
2ND WOMAN. And lying abed never to dress again
He drove his wife to keep the whisky pouring—
A terrible foolhardy drink for him,
As well he knew.
1ST WOMAN. Indeed, she would be driven,
Poor girl, if he miscall'd her half as much
As he miscall'd Jack Turpin's face to-night.
3RD MAN [*Turpin*]. O let it be.
1ST MAN. Well, now the next affair
Is breakfast, I suppose.
2ND WOMAN. Mine will be cheap.
Breakfast! when I'ld be chawing to the din
Of a dead man shouting like a monster at me:
'I say they might as well cut off my head
As do the things inside of me they're doing!'

1ST WOMAN. 'Catch my head,' he cries to me, 'catch my head:
There it goes bouncing past you down the stairs,
And every bump a souse of my best blood.'—
I'll dream to-night of lobbing Peter's head
Up the staircase to him on the landing:
And he to catch it there and clap it down
Splash on his shoulders, and grin down to me.

2ND MAN [*the old one*]. Don't! You will start a mischief in my brain,
To rouse in the night and sneak out, filling my sleep
With dreams of blood.

1ST WOMAN. If it 's of your own blood,
It will be dreams of vinegar.

2ND MAN. Be quiet!—
To dream of blood would mean I'm going to die,
Certain as stabbing. And I don't want to die.

1ST MAN. Nor I; so let 's be shambling. I'm half clemm'd.

2ND WOMAN. Ay, go about your breakfast, do!—That 's all
The trouble a man has—to scoff his meals.

3RD MAN [*moving off*]. So Peter 's gone! Gone off like gunpowder!
A flaring way to die!

1ST MAN. We used to call him
Old Jolly-Nose, at the inn.

1ST WOMAN. And you may say
His best friend killed him.

1ST MAN. Ay, 'tis things like this
Give drink a bad name . . .

[*They go off severally and leave the stage empty awhile. Presently Luther strolls in: he is a tall, loose-limbed, cheerful, good-natured looking man; bearded, slovenly, somewhat older than middle-age.*

LUTHER. Quiet, eh?—That should mean he 's made his end.—
Now what 's the mood, I wonder?—Hi! In there!
Missis! [*A little girl runs out of the house and flings into his arms.*
Why, sweetheart, you're about betimes!
Where will your mother be?

THE GIRL. Upstairs.

LUTHER. Alone?
THE GIRL. I'm frightened.
LUTHER. No, not frightened now?
THE GIRL. The house
Has gone so quiet.
LUTHER. Not frightened now, though, honey?
THE GIRL. Mother says Daddy 's dead.—O let 's go off
And play at something.
LUTHER. I've a word or two
First for your mother. What is she doing? Crying?
THE GIRL. Saying her prayers.
LUTHER. That will not help her much.
Run you and fetch her here.
THE GIRL. No, no, I won't!
I'll not go into the house again.
LUTHER. You shan't:
An idle-witted chap I was to say it.
Why, I'ld not go in there myself! So now
Let 's try if hollaring will bring her out.
Missis!—Join in.—Missis!
THE GIRL. Mother, mother!
LUTHER. We have moved something. I heard a door shut to.—
How would you like to have me for your daddy?
THE GIRL [*reproachful, pushing away from him*].
O now you go and spoil it!
LUTHER. What 's to do?
And you such friends with me!
THE GIRL. But if you were
My daddy, you would be slapping me, I know.
LUTHER. Slapping? . . . Good God, the stuff they make men of!
No; I can tell you, 'twill be games all day
When I'm your daddy: slapping 's done with now.
[*Martha comes out of the cottage door.*
MARTHA. What are you putting in her mind?
LUTHER [*to the Girl*]. Run off.
I'll find you soon. Think how'll we'll spend the morning.
Wading the stream for loaches?

THE GIRL. O yes, that!

LUTHER. Be scarce then for a while, little sweetheart. [*The Girl runs off.*]
That 's an old promise. She 's agog to feel
Her first loach under her toes, squirming and slipping,
Trapt on the gravel. Have no thought for her;
I'll give my day to her and keep her cheered.
I'm very sure it 's wrong, out-and-out wrong,
To let a child be startled with the gliff
Of the real thing inside our talk of death.

MARTHA. So I'm to have the child against me too?

LUTHER. If I can ply you anyway with her,
I'll see I have her mind and let my will
Strain upon you through her: that 's only sense.—
But she 's the weakest of the ropes I've hitched
About you. You are muddled, I dare say,
With Peter dying; the fuss still goes on
About your wits like a flood pushing past
A willow, tugging at the branches, long
After it has done raining: you may forget
How firm I've fastened you to what I mean.
So here I've done the friendly thing, and come
To give you the mere hint the ropes still hold
I have had rigged about you this good while.

MARTHA. 'Twas kindly thought of.

LUTHER. Only a slight twitch,
A tingling jerk or two: you will soon feel
The purchase I have got on you. And then,
Soon as the ropes begin to tell on you,
You'll come my way, I hope, of your own motion,
Before I need to start winding them in.

MARTHA. It would be best to say out what you want.

LUTHER. What I want?—Whose is that house?

MARTHA. 'Tis mine
Now, I suppose.

LUTHER. And I suppose it 's mine.
And that 's the very thing the law supposes.

Why, if I took your house, your traps and sticks,
Everything—sent you off stript like a nigger—
Would that half fill, ay, or a quarter fill
The rummage Peter has made in my affairs,
Scattering money of mine as a terrier kicks
The earth behind him, burrowing in a warren?

MARTHA. Is so much owing?—I could work it off,
Maybe; and I've some money hid.

LUTHER. You've not:
It is my money you've in hiding, mine.
Just let me hammer that into your brain,
Clean through, and rivet it on t'other side.
I say you're naught, naught but body and soul,
Just your own nature: all your belongings now
Are packt up in your skin. There: is that clencht?
Bless you, Peter was in and out of my purse
Like playing at lucky-bag: half-crowns and tizzies,
Ten pound notes and sovereigns—all one to him.
And it 's all written down, what Peter fingered,
Written and fairly signed—fair as he could:
I've seen him sign half on the paper and half
On the deal table top, when he was owlish.
But it 's a book I have, a regular bible,
Of I O U and Peter's name—O, pages!
Well: the world round about knows, and you know,
My money goes from me to bring in gain.
There 's other gain than cash, though; I've a mind
To marry.

MARTHA. You should have all there is to know
Of marrying by heart.

LUTHER. Why, not quite all.
The twice I've married so far, you may say,
Has been just doing business: good strokes, both.
But too much business stiffens upon a man
Till he is shell'd tight as a tortoise: I'm strong
On a man marrying once in his life at least
For pleasure. And it 's you I'll have for pleasure.

MARTHA. And I'm a dummy in this bargain?
LUTHER. Yes:
I don't see what you'ld have to say; it 's struck.
But once we can look back on the deal made good,
You'll find me the easiest temper in the parish;
It 's just that I must have my way.
MARTHA. You won't!
You sell me up and see if I care a wink!
LUTHER. I know what 's speaking now; I've a good ear:
You have your fancy still for that young fellow.
Well, turn it out. He 's off to the war, and that
Will keep him doing for a smart spell yet.
You've him to thank, though, that I took this gait,
Spinning my money into a tackle upon you;
I've seen him eyeing you.—Well, the last knot
That wanted tying was Peter's death; so now,
Shall I not start the pully-haul before
Johnny comes marching home—a sergeant-major!
MARTHA. I'ld laugh at this in a tale.
LUTHER. What 's the strange thing?
MARTHA. You so cheering yourself with wickedness
And relishing the injuries you've done
And mean to do still; and the man you set
Death tracking after, like a dog on a hare,
Lying within a stride of you!
LUTHER. I set
Death on his track?
MARTHA. What else was your money
But death hot-foot after him?—Then to come here
With a brag about it all!—Ay, and bidding
Me to stand in with you!
LUTHER. Don't make it out
Such mighty news! I dare say it has been
A long time winding in and out of your thoughts,
Much like a taking tune that will keep humming.
Why, Peter meant it himself.
MARTHA. Peter meant it?

LUTHER. We had it square as if a lawyer wrote it.
He'ld come with his palm held out, easy and brazen,
The figure of churchwarden handing the plate.
'Time for another payment,' he would say;
'You know the pledge; and all I bargain for
Is this: keep cool about her till I'm dead.
But if you saw the years I'm going to live,
You'ld have a turn.'—Well, he 's had the turn.—
Come: you are known for duty. 'Twas a good wife
Who stuck so nobly to her man's dying wish
For liquor: stand by him now in this thing too.
MARTHA. And if he'ld said, in one of his snarling whimsies,
'Sup poison when I'm gone: dose yourself full
Of sheep-dip,'—I'ld be meek about that too?—
And I'ld as lief do that as go with you.
LUTHER. O you're the kind for me! Let 's have a flare,
Brave me! I cannot away with quiet women;
I'm for the fire-works.—I've had this to do
Twice already.
MARTHA. Had what to do?
LUTHER. Why, tame
A woman's mind. I make no more of it
Than brushing the nap of a tall hat shiny again.
It seems as if there 's something living in me
Women have to obey.
MARTHA. My mind 's my own.
LUTHER. Is that why you daren't look me in the face?
MARTHA. Pooh, daren't I!
LUTHER. But in my eyes? No, that you daren't;
Dare you, Martha?—Martha, look in my eyes!
[*Speaking very gently, with his hands on her shoulders.*
Look in my eyes and don't blink till I tell you.
Now you see how it is. You'll banter me
Just as much as you please, say you?—But no;
It 's just as much as I please, isn't it?
Isn't it, Martha? Those keen scorning thoughts,

It 's I who let them cluster in your brain,
Isn't it, Martha? Your mind 's in my grasp
As if I held a dandelion-clock
Before me in my fingers: one good puff,
And the pretty down 's adrift, loose in the air:
The very way I'll scatter, when I choose,
The dearest thoughts you have.—Now you may blink.
[*Letting her go.*]
You saw the picture, though.

MARTHA [*dully*]. My mind 's my own.

LUTHER. Why, say that, if you like, over and over.
But every time the words bob up to be said,
Think you can see me smiling to myself,
Holding a dandelion-clock before me
And musing, Shall I blow? Shall I blow now?

MARTHA. O don't! don't!

LUTHER. And you'll remember how you lookt in my eyes;
You'll feel my hands weighing on your shoulders,
And you not able to blink against my gaze,
And being steept in what looks out of me,
Like a white cloth steeping in scarlet dye.

MARTHA. I hate you: you know that.

LUTHER. That 's your affair.
Much better love me. The thing is, you're fast,
You're mine. Be sure, though, I shan't trouble you:
Nor need to trouble myself. You can stay here
And act the widow handsomely awhile.
All you will feel will be a kind of drowze
Settling down on you, gently, very gently—
Like sleepiness, when you're awake too long,
That seems to fasten cobwebs, thousands of them,
Round your limbs, softly clinging and tingling,
Until the flossy threads have wound you tight,
Lapt hand and foot in a cocoon as firm
As rope; and sleep can suck your spirit out.
But you are the one to know, after these nights,
Who wins at last, when it 's a fight with sleep.

Well: so you'll feel me spin my silky thought
About your mind, and hold you in the end
Grasp and helpless, and handling you like steel.

MARTHA. Is that what those two other women felt?

LUTHER. Very likely.

MARTHA. And I am to be the third
To go the way they went?

LUTHER. Why, yes: to church.

MARTHA. To church feet foremost, yes. Where are they now?

LUTHER. Well, they are dead; and come to think of it,
Where is your husband? And dead as my wives are
They didn't drink themselves dead: they went off
In sound respectable diseases both;
The doctor guaranteed them.

MARTHA. I dare say
He'll do the same for me.

LUTHER. When the time comes.

MARTHA. And that 's for you to say?

LUTHER. Pull up! Fancy 's running away with you.
Turn her into the lane that leads to church;
That 's where a widow likes to think of going.—
So! Nothing like a chat for straightening things!
We know where we are now, Martha. I'll go find
The lass, and make a ploy up for the day.
She shall be blithe, I promise! I can touch
Her little mind like harping on it, and keep
A tune of laughter chiming there as bright
As sunny water. She'll tell you I'm the one
To make her happy, Martha: and you, too!
The only thing is—I must have my way. [*He goes.*]

MARTHA. Must you! Not this time.
[*She goes to the door of an outhouse, opens it and peers in.*
Sound asleep, poor boy!
He said he'd had to walk most of the way.
[*She goes in; and shortly after comes out with a young soldier.*

MARTHA. Well, and what if they do see? You're on leave.

SOLDIER. I'm not.
MARTHA. Then how . . . ?
SOLDIER. You said I had to come.
There is no leave: we're going out—I mean
They are. I'm a deserter.
MARTHA. What 's the right name
For me, I wonder?
SOLDIER. Nay, they won't touch you.
You made me do it, but it 's me that did it;
And it is me they'll lag.
MARTHA. We'll get round that;
You'll see.
SOLDIER. And how will I get round it, Martha?
Can you see that?—They're going out, and I
Deserted.—Well? You said I had to come?—
Nobody ever gave a woman aught
That cost the same as this!—But let that be.
It was for you.
MARTHA. O, but for both of us!
And we will put it right. We'll put all right;
There 's a deal more than this. But you don't know.
We're safe now.
SOLDIER. Where is a deserter safe?
MARTHA. O that 's easy.
SOLDIER. Is it? You made me come,
And now you slight it.
MARTHA. O, I don't, I don't!
But worse might be. I had to have you here:
I durstn't let you go to France just now!
SOLDIER. What is it? How 's that drunken . . .
MARTHA. He 's . . . he 's dead.
SOLDIER. Good Christ! Why didn't you say?
MARTHA. I was going to tell you.
SOLDIER. When did he die?
MARTHA. This morning.
SOLDIER. Was it your guess
That this was nearing made you write so wild?

MARTHA. Suppose you'd gone to France! That was the terror—
You would be gone, before . . .
SOLDIER. And not come back?
It does no good, letting such thoughts run on.
MARTHA. But it 's not only that. If he had died
While you were overseas!—Doesn't it sound
Wicked to say, Thank God for such a thing!
SOLDIER. This morning!—While I was asleep in there?
MARTHA. The wonder is, you could sleep through last night.
SOLDIER. The wonder is your letter had no word
That this was coming; and not a word of this
When you were smuggling me away in there.
MARTHA. You were too tired. But all this is nothing.
We'll go away to-night: the road 's clear now.
SOLDIER. I've only one clear road—the way I came:
Give myself up.
MARTHA. O but I've planned it all.
Everything will be safe, you'll see. We'll start
Tramping to-night—
SOLDIER. Where to?
MARTHA. Why, anywhere!
Three days' hard going—a hundred miles away—
You take another name and marry me—
I have the money by—and the next day
Enlist again. You're straight then with the army,
And I'm safe out of here. O we must do it!
SOLDIER. And what would all this crazy work be for?
MARTHA. But what else can you see?
SOLDIER. I've told you once:
Give myself up.
MARTHA. O where 's the gain in that?
Why not go smooth and easy when you can?
SOLDIER. A fine smooth thing, to be called a deserter!
MARTHA. But you'll enlist again: that 's not deserting.
SOLDIER. Won't it be, if I meet one of my mates!
You've made me a pretty figure—and for why,
I'm puzzled.

MARTHA. Well, not for fun.
SOLDIER. For all the sense
I see in it, it might be that.
MARTHA. You don't
See, I suppose, I've made myself all yours?
SOLDIER. O Martha, was there any need to shame me?
He 's gone, the staggering sot who fleered between us;
Could we not wait?
MARTHA. No!—Do you want me still?
SOLDIER. Well, I've deserted for you: I've sneakt off
Cringeing away from men who were my sworn friends
Just when the danger 's sighted.—Don't I know
How, when their talk happens upon my name,
They'll spit it out as if they tasted dirt!
And you say, do I want you?—I wish I didn't!
MARTHA. You've done this for me. Now there 's more to do.
And if it were ten times worse than what you've done
I'ld ask you for it.
SOLDIER. I'll be bound you would;
And I suppose I'ld do it.
MARTHA. You'ld have to do it.
You don't know what the work 's been here, while I
Have been alone, and you've been—smartly soldiering.
You don't know what it is to feel the chance
Of what may happen to you, like a live thing
Watching you—sitting there quietly, with bright eyes
Smouldering like a fiend's, hungering at you,
Croucht there waiting, set like the spring of a trap,
Eyeing the strain you make to keep away;
And still you are pusht sideling nearer and nearer;—
Until it comes to him, the panther's moment,
To leap and hug me against his loathsome breath!
SOLDIER. Why, what 's all this?
MARTHA. It 's Luther, Luther! He means
To have me: and there 's one person in the world
Who is to say whether he shall or no.
SOLDIER. That should be you.

MARTHA. Me!—Nay, Peter has made
All his belongings over to his old friend!
SOLDIER. That 's not a way to talk.—And do you mean
You've brought me here with my brain buzzing the word
Like clockwork . . .
MARTHA. What word?
SOLDIER. Deserter, deserter!
Whatever I hear now, there'll be that word in it!
And all because an old blackguardly man
Shows you he has a mind to marry you.
Why, it 's a joke.
MARTHA. I'll make you understand
Some day. I'm pawned to him—but that is nothing;
I've not a thing of my own: everything here
Is charity, Luther's charity; and still
I make nothing of that.—But you would think
I'ld have a right to my own mind! And even
That he has taken.
SOLDIER. How can you talk so trifling?
MARTHA. I'm in his hands like—but you'll think that silly:
Only it is so; as long as I stay here
He need no more than breathe—and all I am,
All that my life knows for its very own,
Would scatter like flighty down.—But I'll try this.
There was a story in the papers: how a woman
Was walking in the tropics by herself,
And one of those huge monkeys carried her off.
They got her back; she said, as the beast came close,
Snarling with pleasure to be handling her,
The life in her stood fixt: her flesh set hard
As gritstone at his twitching fondling paws,
And yet she was all one nerve of blinding horror.
The story is me and Luther. And there 's worse:
I have the notion of him reaching out
A grasp upon my mind, plucking it like—
O like plucking a dandelion-clock
To blow it away with 'Loves me—loves me not.'

SOLDIER. There 's more in this than I can well make out.
MARTHA. More than anyone can: let it alone.
You've come; that 's the main thing. Don't make it now
All for nothing! Take me away from here!
Marry me, and make me your own property
Nobody else can touch—then, what you please:
Everything after that is all yours, yours.
But away from here, away from here!
SOLDIER. All right.
Since you have got me here, I may as well
Go through.
MARTHA. We'll start to-night; you'll hide till then.
SOLDIER. Hide! Yes, I'm getting clever now at hiding!
MARTHA. And I'll creep round to my sister's, and make sure
The child will be well used.—Is it so hard
To give me this? The choice you have is not
My life or death; but am I to live clean flesh
Or foul as a weeping sore full of maggots.
SOLDIER. You needn't go on telling me; I believe you.
I had the choice of being a passable man
Or a swindling sneak-thief lily-livered deserter.
I've chosen as you askt me; and why not
Go on that way? It will not harm me now.
MARTHA. Why, but you talk as though I only take
And cannot give.
SOLDIER. Well, that 's how it is, it seems.
I am not grumbling. What is there you can give?
It 's been a cruel price, and I'm right glad
It 's been all mine to pay.
MARTHA. O I am sure
This will be rankling soon.
SOLDIER. You're hard to please.
I've paid the shot for both of us, and make
No grudge of it.
MARTHA. Then we start out of tune,
And you will come to hate me.
SOLDIER. Have I not proved

I love you? Have I not made myself for you
A thing I loathe? What is it now you want?
Am I to cheer about it?
MARTHA. I have not asked
For what I'd shirk myself—for both of us.
SOLDIER. I know, I know. I am all out of tune.
MARTHA. The giving has not all been yours.
SOLDIER. I know.
You've had vile things to bear.
MARTHA. But you are glad
Our lives at last are our own?
SOLDIER. Yes, yes!
MARTHA. And that
Is what it has been mine to give.
SOLDIER. You gave it?
But it was Peter's death!—My God! I had
Forgotten the poor beast is lying in there!
MARTHA. Ay, it 's a marvel what you can forget
When you are put to it—everything you've grown up with!
SOLDIER. What made him die?
MARTHA. The neighbours say it was
The way he drank: he'ld sooner drink than live.
SOLDIER. Do you say that?
MARTHA. I know he wisht to live.
O horribly he wisht to go on living!
SOLDIER. And yet his demon made him kill himself!
MARTHA. Yes. I was his demon.—There had to be an end!—
And Luther always strolling by the house,
Pleasantly scanning around at crops and meadows,
But never a flicker of looking for me, as though
He past a thing here too familiarly
His own, to bother with a glance at it!
There had to be an end!—And with you here!—
Well, I have done it. Is this not giving something?
SOLDIER. My God! What have you given me? A murder?
You killed him?
MARTHA. Nobody could call it murder.

I let him kill himself.

SOLDIER. He did not want to die:
You were just saying so.

MARTHA. That 's true; it was
A thing so hideous, I wonder I don't laugh
To think of it. Longing to live he was;
And whimpering to himself to stop, he'ld reach
To grope if there were liquor handy.—O,
The bottle was always there!

SOLDIER. Where you put it.

MARTHA. There were two things. Peter would take his time—
A month—six months—how should I know?—and die.
You'ld be in France, and I'ld go down alive
Into the filth of hell: O I have felt
As if to flay myself where Luther 's toucht me
Would make me laugh like a child at being tickled,
If it would take the sickening sense of him off me!—
That was one thing I saw. And there was this—
Peter might die before you went to France;
And very soon you would be going, you said.
You'ld come for me;—and I need not be the pleasure
Of a fiendish monkey, if Peter would die soon.

SOLDIER. And so you plied him.

MARTHA. I tell you, you can't blame me.
He'd promised me to Luther. And what great thing
Is a dram more or less to a dying tippler?

SOLDIER. I am not blaming you; but I am going.

MARTHA. Going? Where to?

SOLDIER. The way I came. I know
What I shall have there; it 's clean black or white,
The offer there: you live or else you're killed.
But here—well, I can say this for the war:
It does get you away from living at home.

MARTHA. I've killed your love for me.

SOLDIER. I can't tell you.
When I'm in clink, and feel a decent man,
I shall know that. Now all I know is this—

I will not let the life that you belong to
Touch me.

MARTHA. So I should soil you!

SOLDIER. It 's no good,
Martha. A man 's not dainty if there are things
He cannot eat.

MARTHA. You are not really going?—
O leave love out! For pity's sake—

SOLDIER. I can't!

MARTHA. You will let Luther put his clutch on me?

SOLDIER. You'll have me weakening; I must go now.
I should feel safe if I could see the bayonets
Coming to take me: and likely I'll meet them. [*He goes.*

MARTHA. You are not leaving me here?—

[*A pause. Martha is seated with chin in hands, staring at the ground.*

[*The little girl runs in.*

THE GIRL. O mummy! Do you know what Luther says?
He 's going to be my daddy from now on!
Will it come true?

MARTHA. I dare say. Have you been happy?

THE GIRL. I always am with him.—And he 's to be
Quite a new sort of daddy. And he 's sent
A present to you.

MARTHA. To me?

THE GIRL. I was to hold it
Behind my back, and say, 'A present for you
From Luther.'

MARTHA. Show me.

THE GIRL. A dandelion-clock!—
I don't think *that 's* much of a present, do you?

CURTAIN

THE END OF THE WORLD

PERSONS

HUFF, the Farmer
SOLLERS, the Wainwright
MERRICK, the Smith
VINE, the Publican
SHALE, the Labourer
A DOWSER
MRS. HUFF
WARP, the Molecatcher
Men and Women of the Village.

ACT I

SCENE.—*A public-house kitchen. Huff the Farmer and Sollers the Wainwright talking; another man, a stranger, sitting silent.*

HUFF. Ay, you may think we're well off—
SOLLERS. Now for croaks.
Old toad! who 's trodden on you now?—Go on;
But if you can, croak us a new tune.
HUFF. Ay,
You think you're well off—and don't grab my words
Before they're spoken—but some folks, I've heard,
Pity us living quiet in the valley.
SOLLERS. Well, I suppose 'tis their affair.
HUFF. Is it?
But what I mean to say,—if they think small
Of us that live in the valley, mayn't it show
That we aren't all so happy as we think?
[*Merrick the Smith comes in.*
MERRICK. Quick, cider! I believe I've swallowed a coal.
SOLLERS. Good evening. True, the heat 's a wonder to-night.
[*Smith draws himself cider.*

HUFF. Haven't you brought your flute? We've all got room
For music in our minds to-night, I'll swear.
Working all the day in the sun do seem to push
The thought out of your brain.
SOLLERS. O, 'tis the sun
Has trodden on you? That 's what makes you croak?
Ay, whistle him somewhat: put a tune in his brain;
He'll else croak us out of pleasure with drinking.
MERRICK. 'Tis quenching, I believe.—A tune? Too hot.
You want a fiddler.
HUFF. Nay, I want your flute.
I like a piping sound, not scraping o' guts.
MERRICK. This is no weather for a man to play
Flutes or music at all that asks him spend
His breath and spittle: you want both yourself
These oven days. Wait till a fiddler comes.
HUFF. Who ever comes down here?
SOLLERS. There 's someone come.
[*Pointing with his pipe to the stranger.*
MERRICK. Good evening, mister. Are you a man for tunes?
STRANGER. And if I was I'ld give you none to-night.
MERRICK. Well, no offence: there 's no offence, I hope,
In taking a dummy for a tuneful man.
Is it for can't or won't you are?
STRANGER. You wouldn't, if you carried in your mind
What I've been carrying all day.
SOLLERS. What 's that?
STRANGER. You wait; you'll know about it soon; O yes,
Soon enough it will find you out and rouse you.
HUFF. Now ain't that just the way we go down here?
Here in the valley we're like dogs in a yard,
Chained to our kennels and wall'd in all round,
And not a sound of the world jumps over our hills.
And when there comes a passenger among us,
One who has heard what 's stirring out beyond,
'Tis a grutchy mumchance fellow in the dismals!
STRANGER. News, is it, you want? I could give you news!

I wonder, did you ever hate to feel
The earth so fine and splendid?

HUFF. Oh, you're one
Has stood in the brunt of the world's wickedness,
Like me? But listen, and I'll give you a tale
Of wicked things done in this little valley,
Done against me, will surely make you think
The Devil here fetcht up his masterpiece.

SOLLERS. Ah, but it 's hot enough without you talking
Your old hell fire about that pair of sinners.
Leave them alone and drink.

HUFF. I'll smell them grilling
One of these days.

MERRICK. But there'll be nought to drink
When that begins! Best keep your skin full now.

STRANGER. What do I care for wickedness? Let those
Who've played with dirt, and thought the game was bold,
Make much of it while they can: there 's a big thing
Coming down to us, ay, well on its road,
Will make their ploys seem mighty piddling sport.

HUFF. This is a fool; or else it 's what I think,—
The world now breeds such crowd that they've no room
For well-grown sins: they hatch 'em small as flies.
But you stay here, out of the world awhile,
Here where a man's mind, and a woman's mind,
Can fling out large in wickedness: you'll see
Something monstrous here, something dreadful.

STRANGER. I've seen enough of that. Though it was only
Fancying made me see it, it was enough:
I've seen the folk of the world yelling aghast,
Scurrying to hide themselves. I want nought else
Monstrous and dreadful.—

MERRICK. What had roused 'em so?
Some house afire?

HUFF. A huzzy flogged to death
For her hard-faced adultery?

STRANGER [*too intent to hear them*]. Oh to think of it!

Talk, do, chatter some nonsense, else I'll think:
And then I'm feeling like a grub that crawls
All abroad in a dusty road; and high
Above me, and shaking the ground beneath me, come
Wheels of a thundering wain, right where I'm plodding.

SOLLERS. Queer thinking, that.

STRANGER. And here 's a queerer thing.
I have a sort of lust in me, pushing me still
Into that terrible way of thinking, like
Black men in India lie them down and long
To feel their holy wagon crack their spines.

MERRICK. Do you mean beetles? I've driven over scores,
They sprawling on their backs, or standing mazed.
I never knew they liked it.

SOLLERS. He means frogs.
I know what 's in his mind. When I was young
My mother would catch us frogs and set them down,
Lapt in a screw of paper, in the ruts,
And carts going by would quash 'em; and I'ld laugh,
And yet be thinking, 'Suppose it was myself
Twisted stiff in huge paper, and wheels
Big as the wall of a barn treading me flat!'

HUFF. I know what 's in his mind: just madness it is.
He 's lookt too hard at his fellows in the world;
Sight of their monstrous hearts, like devils in cages,
Has jolted all the gearing of his wits.
It needs a tough brain, ay, a brain like mine,
To pore on ugly sin and not go mad.

STRANGER. Madness! You're not far out.—I came up here
To be alone and quiet in my thoughts,
Alone in my own dreadful mind. The path,
Of red sand trodden hard, went up between
High hedges overgrown of hawthorn blowing
White as clouds; ay, it seemed burrowed through
A white sweet-smelling cloud,—I walking there
Small as a hare that runs its tunnelled drove
Thro' the close heather. And beside my feet

Blue greygles drifted gleaming over the grass;
And up I climbed to sunlight green in birches,
And the path turned to daisies among grass
With bonfires of the broom beside, like flame
Of burning straw: and I lookt into your valley.
I could scarce look.
Anger was smarting in my eyes like grit.
O the fine earth and fine all for nothing!
Mazed I walkt, seeing and smelling and hearing:
The meadow lands all shining fearfully gold,—
Cruel as fire the sight of them toucht my mind;
Breathing was all a honey taste of clover
And bean flowers: I would have rather had it
Carrion, or the stink of smouldering brimstone.
And larks aloft, the happy piping fools,
And squealing swifts that slid on hissing wings,
And yellowhammers playing spry in hedges:
I never noted them before; but now—
Yes, I was mad, and crying mad, to see
The earth so fine, fine all for nothing!

SOLLERS [*spits*]. Pst! yellowhammers! He talks gentry talk.
That 's worse than being mad.

STRANGER. I tell you, you'll be feeling them to-morn
And hating them to be so wonderful.

MERRICK. Let 's have some sense. Where do you live?

STRANGER. Nowhere.
I'm always travelling.

HUFF. Why, what 's your trade?

STRANGER. A dowser.

HUFF. You're the man for me!

STRANGER. Not I.

HUFF. Ho, this is better than a fiddler now!
One of those fellows who have nerves so clever
That they can feel the waters of underground
Tingling in their fingers?
You find me a spring in my high grazing-field,
I'll give you what I save in trundling water.

STRANGER. I find you water now!—No, but I'll find you
Fire and fear and unbelievable death.

[*Vine the Publican comes in.*

VINE. Are ye all served? Ay, seems so; what 's your score?
MERRICK. Two ciders.
HUFF. Three.
SOLLERS. And two for me.
VINE [*to Dowser*]. And you?
DOWSER. Naught. I was waiting on you.
VINE. Will you drink?
DOWSER. Ay! Drink! what else is left for a man to do
Who knows what I know?
VINE. Good. What is't you know?
You tell it out and set my trade a-buzzing.
SOLLERS. He 's queer. Give him his mug and ease his tongue.
VINE. I had to swill the pigs: else I'd been here;
But we've the old fashion in this house; you draw,
I keep the score. Well, what 's the worry on you?
SOLLERS. O he 's in love.
DOWSER. You fleering grinning louts,
I'll give it you now; now have it in your faces!
SOLLERS. Crimini, he 's going to fight!
DOWSER. You try and fight with the thing that 's on my side!
MERRICK. A ranter!
HUFF. A boozy one then.
DOWSER. Open yon door;
'Tis dark enough by now. Open it, you.
VINE. Hold on. Have you got something fierce outside?
MERRICK. A Russian bear?
SOLLERS. Dowsers can play strange games.
HUFF. No tricks!
DOWSER. This is a trick to rouse the world.

[*He opens the door.*

Look out! Between the elms! There 's my fierce thing.
MERRICK. He means the star with the tail like a feather of fire.
SOLLERS. Comet, it 's called.
HUFF. Do you mean the comet, mister?

DOWSER. What do you think of it?

HUFF. Pretty enough.
But I saw a man loose off a rocket once;
It made more stir and flare of itself; though yon
Does better at steady burning.

DOWSER. Stir and flare!
You'll soon forget your rocket.

MERRICK. Tell you what
I thought last night, now, going home. Says I,
'Tis just the look of a tadpole: if I saw
A tadpole silver as a dace, that swam
Upside-down towards me through black water,
I'ld see the plain spit of that star and his tail.

SOLLERS. And how does your thought go?

DOWSER. It 's what I know!—
A tadpole and a rocket!—My dear God,
And I can still laugh out!—What do you think
Your tadpole 's made of? What lets your rocket fling
Those streaming sparks across the half of night,
Splashing the burning spray of its haste among
The quiet business of the other stars?
Ay, that 's a fiery jet it leaves behind
In such enormous drift! What sort of fire
Is spouted so, spouted and never quenching?—
There is no name for that star's fire: it is
The fire that was before the world was made,
The fire that all the things we live among
Remember being; and whitest fire we know
Is its poor copy in their dreaming trance!

HUFF. That would be hell fire.

DOWSER. Ay, if you like, hell fire,
Hell fire flying through the night! 'Twould be
A thing to blink about, a blast of it
Swept in your face, eh? and a thing to set
The whole stuff of the earth smoking rarely?
Which of you said 'the heat 's a wonder to-night'?
You have not done with marvelling. There'll come

A night when all your clothes are a pickle of sweat,
And, for all that, the sweat on your salty skin
Shall dry and crack in the breathing of a wind
That 's like a draught come through an open'd furnace.
The leafage of the trees shall brown and faint,
All sappy growth turning to brittle rubbish
As the near heat of the star strokes the green earth;
And time shall brush the fields as visibly
As a rough hand brushes against the nap
Of gleaming cloth—killing the season's colour,
Each hour charged with the wasting of a year;
And sailors panting on their warping decks
Will watch the sea steam like broth about them.
You'll know what I know then!—That towering star
Hangs like a fiery buzzard in the night
Intent over our earth—Ay, now his journey
Points, straight as a plummet's drop, down to us!

HUFF. Why, that 's the end of the world!

DOWSER. You've said it now.

SOLLERS. What, soon? In a day or two?

MERRICK. You can't mean that!

VINE. End of the world! Well now, I never thought
To hear the news of that. If you've the truth
In what you say, likely this is an evening
That we'll be talking over often and often.
'How was it, Sollers?' I'll say; 'or you, Merrick,
Do you mind clearly how he lookt?'—And then—
' "End of the world," he said, and drank—like that,
Solemn!'—And right he was: he had it all
As sure as I have when my sow 's to farrow.

DOWSER. Are you making a joke of me? Keep your mind
For tippling while you can.

VINE. Was that a joke?
I'm always bad at seeing 'em, even my own.

DOWSER. A fool's! 'Twill cheer you when the earth blows up
Like as it were all gunpowder.

VINE. You mean
The star will butt his burning head against us?
'Twill knock the world to flinders, I suppose?
DOWSER. Ay, or with that wild, monstrous tail of his
Smash down upon the air, and make it bounce
Like water under the flukes of a harpooned whale,
And thrash it to a poisonous fire; and we
And all the life of the world drowned in blazing!
VINE. 'Twill be a handsome sight. If my old wife
Were with me now! This would have suited her.
'I do like things to happen!' she would say;
Never shindy enough for her; and now
She 's gone, and can't be seeing this!
DOWSER. You poor fool.
How will it be a sight to you, when your eyes
Are scorcht to little cinders in your head?
VINE. Whether or no, there must be folks outside
Willing to know of this. I'll scatter your news. [*He goes.*

[*A short pause: then Sollers breaks out.*

SOLLERS. No, no; it wouldn't do for me at all;
Nor for you neither, Merrick? End of the world?
Bogy! A parson's tale or a bairn's!
MERRICK. That 's it.
Your trade 's a gift, easy as playing tunes.
But Sollers here and I, we've had to drill
Sinew and muscle into their hard lesson,
Until they work in timber and glowing iron
As kindly as I pick up my pint: your work
Grows in your nature, like plain speech in a child,
But we have learnt to think in a foreign tongue;
And something must come out of all our skill!
We shan't go sliding down as glib as you
Into notions of the End of the World.
SOLLERS. Give me a tree, you may say, and give me steel,
And I'll put forth my shapely mind; I'll make,
Out of my head like telling a well-known tale,
A wain that goes as comely on the roads

As a ship sailing, the lines of it true as gospel.
Have I learnt that all for nothing?—O no!
End of the World? It wouldn't do at all.
No more making of wains, after I've spent
My time in getting the right skill in my hands?

DOWSER. Ay, you begin to feel it now, I think;
But you complain like boys for a game spoilt:
Shaping your carts, forging your iron! But Life,
Life, the mother who lets her children play
So seriously busy, trade and craft,—
Life with her skill of a million years' perfection
To make her heart's delighted glorying
Of sunlight, and of clouds about the moon,
Spring lighting her daffodils, and corn
Ripening gold to ruddy, and giant seas,
And mountains sitting in their purple clothes—
O life I am thinking of, life the wonder,
All blotcht out by a brutal thrust of fire
Like a midge that a clumsy thumb squashes and smears.

HUFF. Let me but see the show beginning, though!
You'ld mind me then! O I would like you all
To watch how I should figure, when the star
Brandishes over the whole air its flame
Of thundering fire; and naught but yellow rubbish
Parcht on the perishing ground, and there are tongues
Chapt with thirst, glad to lap stinking ponds,
And pale glaring faces spying about
On the earth withering, terror the only speech!
Look for me then, and see me stand alone
Easy and pleasant in the midst of it all.
Did you not make your merry scoff of me?
Was it your talk, that when yon shameless pair
Threw their wantoning in my face like dirt,
I had no heart against them but to grumble?
You would be saying that, I know! But now,
Now I believe it 's time for you to see
My patient heart at last taking its wages.

SOLLERS. Pull up, man! Screw the brake on your running tongue,
Else it will rattle you down the tumbling way
This fellow 's gone.

MERRICK. And one man 's enough
With brain quagged axle-deep in crazy mire.
We won't have you beside him in his puddles,
And calling out with him on the End of the World
To heave you out with a vengeance.

HUFF. What you want!
Have I not borne enough to make me know
I must be righted sometime?—And what else
Would break the hardy sin in them, which lets
Their souls parade so daring and so tall
Under God's hate and mine? What else could pay
For all my wrong but a blow of blazing anger
Striking down to shiver the earth, and change
Their strutting wickedness to horror and crying?

MERRICK. Be quiet, Huff! If you mean to believe
This dowser's stuff, and join him in his bedlam,
By God, you'll have to reckon with my fist.

[*Shale comes in. Huff glares at him speechless, but with wrath evidently working.*

SHALE. Where 's the joker? You, is it? Here 's hot news
You've brought us; all the valley 's hissing aloud,
And makes as much of you falling into it
As a pail of water would of a glowing coal.

SOLLERS. Don't you start burbling too, Shale.

SHALE. That 's the word!
Burbling, simmering, ay and bumpy-boiling:
All the women are mobbed together close
Under the witan-trees, and their full minds
Boil like so many pans slung on a fire.
Why, starlings trooping in a copse in fall
Could make no scandal like it.

MERRICK. What is it, man?

SHALE. End of the World! The flying star! End of the World!

SOLLERS. They don't believe it though?

SHALE. What? the whole place
Has gone just randy over it!
MERRICK. Hold your noise!
SOLLERS. I shall be daft if this goes on.
SHALE. Ay, so?
The End of the World 's been here? You look as though
You'd startled lately. And there 's the virtuous man!
How would End of the World suit our good Huff,
Our old crab-verjuice Huff?
HUFF [*seizing the Dowser and bringing him up in front of Shale*].
Look at him there!
This is the man I told you of when you
Were talking small of sin. You made it out,
Did you, a fool's mere nasty game, like dogs
That snuggle in muck, and grin and roll themselves
With snorting pleasure? Ah, but you are wrong.
'Tis something that goes thrusting dreadfully
Its wilful bravery of evil against
The worth and right of goodness in the world:
Ay, do you see how his face still brags at me?
And long it has been, the time he 's had to walk
Lording about me with his wickedness.
Do you know what he dared? I had a wife,
A flighty pretty linnet-headed girl,
But mine: he practised on her with his eyes;
He knew of luring glances, and she went
After his calling lust: and all since then
They've lived together, fleering in my face,
Pleased in sight of the windows of my house
With doing wrong, and making my disgrace.
O but wait here with me; wait till your news
Is not to be mistaken, for the way
The earth buckles and singes like hot boards:
You'll surely see how dreadful sin can be
Then, when you mark these two running about,
With raging fear for what they did against me
Buzzing close to their souls, stinging their hearts,

And they like scampering beasts when clegs are fierce,
Or flinging themselves low as the ground to writhe,
Their arms hugging their desperate heads. And then
You'll see what 'tis to be an upright man,
Who keeps a patient anger for his wrongs
Thinking of judgement coming—you will see that
When you mark how my looks hunt these wretches,
And smile upon their groans and posturing anguish.
O watch how calm I'll be, when the blazing air
Judges their wickedness; you watch me then
Looking delighted, like a nobleman
Who sees his horse winning an easy race.

MERRICK. You fool, Huff, you believe it now!

HUFF. You fool,
Merrick, how should I not believe a thing
That calls aloud on my mind and spirit, and they
Answer to it like starving conquering soldiers
Told to break out and loot?

SHALE. You vile old wasp!

SOLLERS. We've talked enough: let 's all go home and sleep;
There might be a fiend in the air about us, one
Who pours his will into our minds to see
How we can frighten one another.

HUFF. A fiend?
Shale will soon have the flapping wings of a fiend,
And flaming wings, beating about his head.
There'll be no air for Shale, very soon now,
But the breathing of a fiend: the star 's coming!
The star that breathes a horrible fury of fire
Like glaring fog into the empty night;
And in the gust of its wrath the world will soon
Shrivel and spin like paper in a furnace.
I knew they both would have to pay me at last
With sight of their damned souls for all my wrong!

SHALE. Somebody stop his gab.

MERRICK [*seizing the Dowser and shaking him*]. Is it the truth?
Is it the truth we're in the way of the star?

SOLLERS. O let us go home; let us go home and sleep!

[*A crowd of men and women burst in and shout confusedly.*

1. Look out for the star!
2. 'Tis moving, moving.
3. Grows as you stare at it.
4. Bigger than ever.
1. Down it comes with a diving pounce,
As though it had lookt for us and at last found us.
2. O so near and coming so quick!
3. And how the burning hairs of its tail
Do seem surely to quiver for speed.
4. We saw its great tail twitch behind it,
'Tis come so near, so gleaming near.
1. The tail is wagging!
2. Come out and see!
3. The star is wagging its tail and eyeing us—
4. Like a cat huncht to leap on a bird.

MERRICK. Out of my way and let me see for myself.

[*They all begin to hustle out: Huff speaks in midst of the turmoil.*

HUFF. Ay, now begins the just man's reward;
And hatred of the evil thing
Now is to be satisfied.
Wrong ventured out against me and braved:
And I'll be glad to see all breathing pleasure
Burn as foolishly to naught
As a moth in candle flame,
If I but have my will to watch over those
Who injured me bawling hoarse heartless fear.

[*They are all gone but Huff, Shale and the Dowser.*

SHALE. As for you, let you and the women make
Your howling scare of this; I'll stand and laugh.
But if it truly were the End of the World,
I'ld be the man to face it out, not you:
I who have let life go delighted through me,
Not you, who've sulkt away your chance of life
In mumping about being paid for goodness. [*Going.*

HUFF [*after him*]. You wait, you wait! [*He follows the rest.*

DOWSER [*alone*]. Naught but a plague of flies!
I cannot do with noises, and light fools
Terrified round me; I must go out and think
Where there is quiet and no one near. O, think!
Life that has done such wonders with its thinking,
And never daunted in imagining;
That has put on the sun and the shining night,
The flowering of the earth and tides of the sea,
And irresistible rage of fate itself,
All these as garments for its spirit's journey—
O now this life, in the brute chance of things,
Murder'd, uselessly murder'd! And naught else
For ever but senseless rounds of hurrying motion
That cannot glory in itself. O no!
I will not think of that; I'll blind my brain
With fancying the splendours of destruction;
When like a burr in the star's fiery mane
The crackling earth is caught and rusht along,
The forests on the mountains blazing so,
That from the rocks of ore beneath them come
White-hot rivers of smelted metal pouring
Across the plains to roar into the sea. . . .

[*The curtain is lowered for a few moments only.*]

ACT II

As before, a little while after. The room is empty when the curtain goes up. Sollers runs in and paces about, but stops short when he catches sight of a pot dog on the mantelpiece.

SOLLERS. The pace it is coming down!—What to do now?—
My brain has stopt: it 's like a clock that 's fallen
Out of a window and broke all its cogs.—
Where 's that old cider, Vine would have us pay
Twopence a glass for? Let 's try how it smells:

Old Foxwhelp, and a humming stingo it is!
[*To the pot dog.*]
Hullo, you! What are you grinning at?—
I know!
There'll be no score against me for this drink!
O that score! I've drunk it down for a week
With every gulp of cider, and every gulp
Was half the beauty it should have been, the score
So scratcht my swallowing throat, like a wasp in the drink!
And I need never have heeded it!—
Old grinning dog! You've seen me happy here;
And now, all 's done! But do you know this too,
That I can break you now, and never called
To pay for you? [*Throwing the dog on the floor.*
I shall be savage soon!
We're leaving all this!—O, and it was so pleasant
Here, in here, of an evening.——Smash!
[*He sweeps a lot of crockery on to the floor.*
It 's all no good! Let 's make a wreck of it all!
[*Picking up a chair and swinging it.*
Damn me! Now I'm forgetting to drink, and soon
'Twill be too late. Where 's there a mug not shivered?
[*He goes to draw himself cider. Merrick rushes in.*

MERRICK. You at the barrels too? Out of the road!
[*He pushes Sollers away and spills his mug.*

SOLLERS. Go and kick out of doors, you black donkey.

MERRICK. Let me come at the vessel, will you?
[*They wrestle savagely.*

SOLLERS. Keep off;
I'm the first here. Lap what you've spilt of mine.

MERRICK. You with your chiselling and screw-driving,
Your wooden work, you bidding me, the man
Who hammers a meaning into red-hot iron?
[*Vine comes in slowly. He is weeping; the two wrestlers stop and stare at him, as he sits down, and holds his head in his hands, sobbing.*

VINE. O this is a cruel affair!

SOLLERS. Here 's Vine crying!
VINE. I've seen the moon.
MERRICK. The moon? 'Tisn't the moon
That 's tumbling on us, but yon raging star.
What notion now is clotted in your head?
VINE. I've seen the moon; it has nigh broke my heart.
SOLLERS. Not the moon too jumping out of her ways?
VINE. No, no;—but going quietly and shining,
Pushing away a flimsy gentle cloud
That would drift smoky round her, fending it off
With steady rounds of blue and yellow light.
It was not much to see. She was no more
Than a curved bit of silver rind. But I
Never before so noted her—
SOLLERS. What he said,
The dowser!
MERRICK. Ay, about his yellowhammers.
SOLLERS. And there 's a kind of stifle in the air
Already!
MERRICK. It seems to me, my breathing goes
All hot down my windpipe, hot as cider
Mulled and steaming travels down my swallow.
SOLLERS. And a queer racing through my ears of blood.
MERRICK. I wonder, is the star come closer still?
SOLLERS. O, close, I know, and viciously heading down.
VINE. She was so silver! and the sun had left
A kind of tawny red, a dust of fine
Thin light upon the blue where she was lying,—
Just a curled paring of the moon, amid
The faint grey cloud that set the gleaming wheel
Around the tilted slip of shining silver.
O it did seem to me so safe and homely,
The moon quietly going about the earth;
It 's a rare place we have to live in, here;
And life is such a comfortable thing——
And what 's the sense of it all? Naught but to make
Cruel as may be the slaughtering of it. [*He breaks down again.*

SOLLERS. It beats my mind!

[*He begins to walk up and down desperately.*

MERRICK. 'Twas bound to come sometime,
Bound to come, I suppose. 'Tis a poor thing
For us, to fall plumb in the chance of it;
But, now or another time, 'twas bound to be.—
I have been thinking back. When I was a lad
I was delighted with my life: there seemed
Naught but things to enjoy. Say we were bathing:
There'ld be the cool smell of the water, and cool
The splashing under the trees: but I did loathe
The sinking mud slithering round my feet,
And I did love to loathe it so! And then
We'ld troop to kill a wasp's nest; and for sure
I would be stung; and if I liked the dusk
And singing and the game of it all, I loved
The smart of the stings, and fleeing the buzzing furies.
And sometimes I'ld be looking at myself
Making so much of everything; there'ld seem
A part of me speaking about myself:
'You know, this is much more than being happy.
'Tis hunger of some power in you, that lives
On your heart's welcome for all sorts of luck,
But always looks beyond you for its meaning.'
And that 's the way the world 's kept going on,
I believe now. Misery and delight
Have both had liking welcome from it, both
Have made the world keen to be glad and sorry.
For why? It felt the living power thrive
The more it made everything, good and bad,
Its own belonging, forged to its own affair,—
The living power that would do wonders some day.
I don't know if you take me?

SOLLERS. I do, fine;
I've felt the very thought go through my mind
When I was at my wains; though 'twas a thing
Of such a flight I could not read its colour.—

Why was I like a man sworn to a thing,
Working to have my wains in every curve,
Ay, every tenon, right as they should be?
Not for myself, not even for those wains:
But to keep in me living at its best
The skill that must go forward and shape the world,
Helping it on towards its masterpiece.

MERRICK. And never was there aught to come of it!
The world was always looking to use its life
In some great handsome way at last. And now—
We are just fooled. There never was any good
In the world going on or being at all.
The fine things life has plotted to do are worth
A rotten toadstool kickt to flying bits.
End of the World? Ay, and the end of a joke.

VINE. Well, Huff 's the man for this turn.

MERRICK. Ay, the good man!
He could but grunt when times were pleasant; now
There 's misery enough to make him trumpet.
And yet, by God, he shan't come blowing his horn
Over my misery!
We are just fooled, did I say?—We fooled ourselves,
Looking for worth in what was still to come;
And now there 's a stop to our innings. Well, that 's fair:
I've been a living man, and might have been
Nothing at all! I've had the world about me,
And felt it as my own concern. What else
Should I be crying for? I've had my turn.
The world may be for the sake of naught at last,
But it has been for my sake: I've had that.

[*He sits again, and broods.*

SOLLERS. I can't stay here. I must be where my sight
May silence with its business all my thinking—
Though it will be the star plunged down so close
It puffs its flaming vengeance in my face. [*He goes.*

VINE. I wish there were someone who had done me wrong,
Like Huff with his wife and Shale; I wish there were

Somebody I would like to see go crazed
With staring fright. I'ld have my pleasure then
Of living on into the End of the World.
But there is no one at all for me, no one
Now my poor wife is gone.

MERRICK. Why, what did she
To harm you?

VINE. Didn't she marry me?—It 's true
She made it come all right. She died at last.
Besides, it would be wasting wishes on her,
To be in hopes of her weeping at this.
She'ld have her hands on her hips and her tongue jumping
As nimble as a stoat, delighting round
The way the world 's to be terrible and tormented.—
Ay, but I'll have a thing to tell her now
When she begins to ask the news! I'll say
'You've misst such a show as never was nor will be,
A roaring great affair of death and ruin;
And I was there—the world smasht to sparkles!'
O, I can see her vext at that!

[*Merrick has been sunk in thought during this, but Vine seems to brighten at his notion, and speaks quite cheerfully to Huff, who now comes in, looking mopish, and sits down.*

VINE. We've all been envying you, Huff. You're well off,
You with your goodness and your enemies
Showing you how to relish it with their terror.
When do you mean the gibing is to start?

HUFF. There 's time enough.

VINE. O, do they still hold out?
If they should be for spiting you to the last!
You'ld best keep on at them: think out a list
Of frantic things for them to do, when air
Is scorching smother and the sin they did
Frightens their hearts. You'll shout them into fear,
I undertake, if you find breath enough.

HUFF. You have the breath. What 's all your pester for?
You leave me be.

VINE. Why, you're to do for me
What I can't do myself.—And yet it 's hard
To make out where Shale hurt you. What 's the sum
Of all he did to you? Got you quit of marriage
Without the upset of a funeral.

HUFF. Why need you blurt your rambling mind at me?
Let me bide quiet in my thought awhile,
And it 's a little while we have for thought.

MERRICK. I know your thought. Paddling round and around,
Like a squirrel working in a spinning cage
With his neck stretcht to have his chin poke up,
And silly feet busy and always going;
Paddling round the story of your good life,
Your small good life, and how the decent men
Have jeered at your wry antic.

HUFF. My good life!
And what good has my goodness been to me?
You show me that! Somebody show me that!
A caterpillar munching a cabbage-heart,
Always drudging further and further from
The sounds and lights of the world, never abroad
Nor flying free in warmth and air sweet-smelling:
A crawling caterpillar, eating his life
In a deaf dark—that 's my gain of goodness!
And it 's too late to hatch out now!—
I can but fancy what I might have been;
I scarce know how to sin!—But I believe
A long while back I did come near to it.

MERRICK. Well done!—O but I should have guesst all this!

HUFF. I was in Droitwich; and the sight of the place
Is where they cook the brine: a long dark shed,
Hot as an oven, full of a grey steam
And ruddy light that leaks out of the furnace;
And stirring the troughs, ladling the brine that boils
As thick as treacle, a double standing row,
Women—boldly talking in wicked jokes
All day long. I went to see 'em. It was

A wonderful rousing sight. Not one of them
Was really wearing clothes: half of a sack
Pinned in an apron was enough for most,
And here and there might be a petticoat;
But nothing in the way of bodices.—
O, they knew words to shame a carter's face!

MERRICK. This is the thought you would be quiet in!

HUFF. Where else can I be quiet? Now there 's an end
Of daring, 'tis the one place my life has made
Where I may try to dare in thought. I mind,
When I stood in the midst of those bare women,
All at once, outburst with a rising buzz,
A mob of flying thoughts was wild in me:
Things I might do swarmed in my brain pell-mell,
Like a heap of flies kickt into humming cloud.
I beat them down; and now I cannot tell
For certain what they were. I can call up
Naught venturesome and darting like their style;
Very tame braveries now!—O Shale 's the man
To smile upon the End of the World; 'tis Shale
Has lived the bold stiff fashion, and filled himself
With thinking pride in what a man may do.—
I wish I had seen those women more than once!

VINE. Well, here 's an upside down! This is old Huff!
What have you been in your heart all these years?
The man you were or the new man you are?

HUFF. Just a dead flesh!

MERRICK. Nay, Huff the good man at least
Was something alive, though snarling like trapt vermin.
But this? What 's this for the figure of a man?
'Tis a boy's smutty picture on a wall.

HUFF. I was alive, was I? Like a blind bird
That flies and cannot see the flight it takes,
Feeling it with mere rowing of its wings.
But Shale—he 's had a stirring sense of what he is.

[*Shouting outside. Then Sollers walks in again, very quiet and steady. He stands in the middle, looking down on the floor.*

VINE. What do they holla for there?
SOLLERS. The earth.
MERRICK. The earth?
SOLLERS. The earth 's afire.
HUFF. The earth blazing already?
[*Shouts again.*
O, not so soon as this?
VINE. What sort of a fire?
SOLLERS. The earth has caught the heat of the star, you fool.
MERRICK. I know: there 's come some dazzle in your eyes
From facing to the star; a lamp would do it.
HUFF. It will be that. Your sight, being so strained,
Is flashing of itself.
SOLLERS. Say what you like.
There 's a red flare out of the land beyond
Looking over the hills into our valley.
The thing 's begun, 'tis certain. Go and see.
VINE. I won't see that. I will stay here.
SOLLERS. Ay, creep
Into your oven. You'll be cooler there.—
O my God, we'll all be coals in an hour! [*Shouts again.*
HUFF. And I have nought to stand in my heart upright,
And vow it made my living time worth more
Than if my time had been death in a grave!
[*Several persons run in.*
THE CROWD.
1. The river 's the place!
2. The only safe place now!
3. Best all charge down to the river!
4. For there 's a blaze,
A travelling blaze comes racing along the earth.
SOLLERS. 'Tis true. The air 's red-hot above the hills.
THE CROWD.
1. Ay, but the burning now crests the hill-tops
In quiver of yellow flame.
2. And a great smoke
Waving and tumbling upward.

3. The river now!
4. The only place we have, not to be roasted!
MERRICK. And what will make us water-rats or otters,
To keep our breath still living through a dive
That lasts until the earth 's burnt out? Or how
Would that trick serve, when we stand up to gasp,
And find the star waiting for our plunged heads
To knock them into pummy?
VINE. Scarce more dazed
I'ld be with that than now. I shall be bound,
When I'm to give my wife the tale of it all,
To be devising: more of this to-do
My mind won't carry.
HUFF. O ashamed I am,
Ashamed!—It needn't have been downright feats,
Such as the braving men, the like of Shale,
Do easily, and smile, keeping them up.
If I could look back to one manful hour
Of romping in the face of all my goodness!—
[*Shale comes in, dragging Mrs. Huff by the hand.*
SHALE. Huff! Where 's Huff?—Huff, you must take her back!
You'll take her back? She 's yours: I give her up.
MERRICK. Belike here 's something bold again.
MRS. HUFF [*to Shale*]. Once more,
Listen.
SHALE. I will not listen. There 's no time
For aught but giving you back where you belong;
And that 's with you, Huff. Take her.
HUFF. Here is depth
I cannot see to. Is it your last fling?—
The dolt I am in these things!—What 's this way
You've found of living wickedly to the end?
SHALE. Scorn as you please, but take her back, man, take her.
HUFF. But she 's my wife! Take her back now? What for?
MRS. HUFF. What for? Have you not known of thieves that throw
Their robbery down, soon as they hear a step

Sounding behind them on the road, and run
A long way off, and pull an honest face?
Ay, see Shale's eyes practising baby-looks!
He never stole, not he!

SHALE. Don't hear her talk.

MRS. HUFF. But he was a talker once! Love was the thing;
And love, he swore, would make the wrong go right,
And Huff was a kind of devil—and that 's true——

HUFF. What? I've been devilish and never knew?

MRS. HUFF. The devil in the world that hates all love.
But Shale said, he'd the love in him would hold
If the world's frame and the fate of men were crackt.

SHALE. What I said!
Whoever thought the world was going to crack?

MRS. HUFF. And now he hears someone move behind him—
They'll say, perhaps, 'You stole this!'—Down it goes,
Thrown to the dirty road—thrown to Huff!

SHALE. Yes, to the owner.

MRS. HUFF. It was not such brave thieving.
You did not take me from my owner, Shale:
There 's an old robber will do that some day,
Not you.

VINE. Were you thinking of me then, missis?

MRS. HUFF [*still to Shale*]. You found me lost in the dirt: I was with Huff.
You lifted me from there; and there again,
Like a frightened urchin, you're for throwing me.

SHALE. Let it be that! I'm firm
Not to have you about me, when the thing,
Whatever it is, that 's standing now behind
The burning of the world, comes out on us.

HUFF. The way men cheat! This windle-stalk was he
Would hold a show of spirit for the world
To study while it ruined!—Make what you please
Of your short wrangle here, but leave me out.
I have my thoughts—O far enough from this.

[*Turning away.*

SHALE [*seizing him*]. You shall not put me off. I tell you, Huff,
You are to take her back now.
HUFF. Take her back!
And what has she to do with what I want?
SHALE. Isn't she yours? I must be quit of her;
I'll not be in the risk of keeping her.
She 's yours!
HUFF. And what 's the good of her now to me?
What 's the good of a woman whom I've married?
[*During this, Warp the Molecatcher has come in.*
WARP. Shale and Huff at their old pother again!
MERRICK. The Molecatcher!
SOLLERS. Warp, have you travelled far?
Is it through frenzy and ghastly crowds you've come?
VINE. Have you got dreadful things to tell us, Warp?
WARP. Why, no.
But seemingly you'ld have had news for me,
If I'd come later. Is Huff to murder Shale,
Or Shale for murdering Huff? One way or t'other,
'Tis time 'twas settled surely.—Mrs. Huff,
They're neither of them worth you: here 's your health.
[*Draws and drinks.*
HUFF. Where have you been? Are you not new from folk
That throng together in a pelting horror?
WARP. Do you think the whole land hearkens to the flurry
Of an old dog biting at a young dog's throat?
MERRICK. No, no! Not their shrill yapping; you've not heard
The world 's near to be blasted?
WARP. No mutter of it.
I am from walking the whole ground I trap,
And there 's no likeness of it, but the moles
I've turned up dead and dried out of three counties.
SOLLERS. Why, but the fire that 's eating the whole earth,
The breath of it is scarlet in the sky!
You must have seen that?
WARP. But what 's taken you?
You are like boys that go to hunt for ghosts,

And turn the scuttle of rats to a roused demon
Crawling to shut the door of the barn they search.
Fire? Yes, fire is playing a pretty game
Yonder, and has its golden fun to itself,
Seemingly.

SOLLERS. You don't know what 'tis that burns?

WARP. Call me a mole and not a molecatcher
If I do not. It is a rick that burns;
And a strange thing I'll count it if the rick
Be not old Huff's.

SOLLERS. That flare a fired stack?

HUFF. Only one of my ricks alight? O Glory!
There may be chance for me yet.

MERRICK. Best take the train
To Droitwich, Huff.

VINE [*at the door*]. It would be like a stack,
But for the star.

SOLLERS [*to Warp*]. Yes, as you're so clever,
You can talk down maybe yon brandishing star!

WARP. O, 'tis the star has flickt your brains? Indeed,
The tail swings long enough to-night for that.
Well, look your best at it; 'tis off again
To go its rounds, they tell me, from now on;
And the next time it swaggers in our sky,
The moles a long while will have tired themselves
Of having their easy joke with me. [*A pause.*

MERRICK. You mean
The flight of the star is from us?

SOLLERS. But the world,
The whole world reckons on it battering us!

WARP. Who told you that?

SOLLERS. A dowser.

MERRICK. Where 's he gone?

WARP. A dowser! say a tramping conjurer.
You'll believe aught, if you believe a dowser.

SOLLERS. I had it in me to be doubting him.

MERRICK. The noise you made was like that! But I knew

You'ld laugh at me, so sure you were the world
Would shiver like a bursting grindlestone:
Else I'ld have said out loud, 'twas a fool's whimsy.

VINE. Where are you now? What am I now to think?
Your minds run round in puzzles, like chased hares.
I cannot sight them.

MERRICK. Think of going to bed.

SOLLERS. And dreaming prices for your pigs.

MERRICK. O Warp,
You should have seen Vine crying! The moon, he said,
The silver moon! Just like an onion 'twas
To stir the water in his eyes.

SOLLERS. He 's left
A puddle of his tears where he was droopt
Over the table.

VINE. There 's to be no ruin?—
But what 's the word of a molecatcher, to crow
So ringing over a dowser's word?

WARP. I'll tell you.
These dowsers live on lies: my trade 's the truth.
I can read moles, and the way they've dug their journeys,
Where you'ld not see a wrinkle.

VINE. And he knows
The buried water.

WARP. There 's always buried water,
If you prod deep enough. A dowser finds
Because the whole earth 's floating, like a raft.
What does he know? A twitching in his thews;
A dog asleep knows that much. What I know
I've learnt, and if I'd learnt it wrong, I'ld starve.
And if I'm right about the grubbing moles,
Won't I be right for news of walking men?

MERRICK. Of course you're right. Let's put the whole thing by,
And have a pleasant drink.

SHALE [*to Mrs. Huff*]. You must be tired
With all this story. Shall we be off for home?

HUFF. You brass! You don't go now with her! She 's mine:

You gave her up.

SHALE. And you made nothing of her.

[*To Mrs. Huff*]. Come on.

MRS. HUFF. Warp, will you do a thing for me?

WARP. A hundred things.

MRS. HUFF. Then slap me these cur-dogs.

WARP. I will. Where will I slap them, and which first?

MRS. HUFF. Maybe 'twill do if you but laugh at them.

WARP. I'll try for that; but they are not good jokes;
Though there 's a kind of monkey-look about them.

MRS. HUFF. They thinking I'ld be near one or the other
After this night! Will I be made no more
Than clay that children puddle to their minds,
Moulding it what they fancy?—Shale was brave:
He made a bogy and defied it, till
He frightened of his work and ran away.
But Huff!—Huff was for modelling wickedly.

HUFF. Who told you that?

MRS. HUFF. I need no one's telling.
I was your wife once. Don't I know your goodness?
A stupid heart gone sour with jealousy,
To feel its blood too dull and thick for sinning.—
Yes, Huff would figure a wicked thought, but had
No notion how, and flung the clay aside.—
O they were gaudy colours both! But now
Fear has bleacht their swagger and left them blank,
Fear of a loon that cried, End of the World!

HUFF. Shale, do you know what we're to do?

SHALE. I'ld like
To have the handling of that dowser-man.

HUFF. Just that, my lad, just that!

WARP. And your fired rick?

HUFF. Let it be blazes! Quick, Shale, after him!
I'll tramp the night out, but I'll take the rogue.

SHALE [*to the others*]. You wait, and see us haul him by the ears,
And swim the blatherer in Huff's farmyard pond.

[*As Huff and Shale go out, they see the comet before them.*

HUFF. The devil's own star is that!
SHALE. And floats as calm
As a pike basking.
HUFF. There shouldn't be such stars!
SHALE. Neither such dowsers, and we'll learn him that.
[*They go off together.*
SOLLERS. Why, the star 's dwindling now, surely!
MERRICK. O, small
And dull now to the glowing size it was.
VINE. But is it certain there'll be nothing smasht?
Not even a house knockt roaring down in crumbles?
——And I did think, I'ld open my wife's mouth
With envy of the dreadful things I'd seen!

CURTAIN

DEBORAH

TO
PATRICK ABERCROMBIE

DEBORAH

ACT I

PERSONS

SAUL, *a pilot.*
DEBORAH.
THE MOTHER *of Deborah's lover, David.*
MARTIN, *an old fisherman.*
MEN AND WOMEN *of the village.*
A DOCTOR.

A fishing and pilot village on a great estuary. Low cottages on either side of bare ground sloping down to the river. The background is grey water and grey sky, and a low coast on the extreme of sight. On a rough bench beside the open door of one cottage sits moodily Saul, a pilot (L.). A group of men and women (R.) gazing earnestly up the river, among them Deborah, a girl in the early twenties, old Martin, and a woman, thought half-witted by the village (First Woman).

1ST WOMAN. There is no help for us; we are left alone,
Left in the power of this flying thing
That hates our lives: God was the only one
Who saw it sliding down into our air;
He would not hold it back, but means to let
The wild disease play all it will with our souls.
A MAN. Now hold your crying tongue, daft-witted thing;
We're thrang enough without you clamorous.
DEBORAH [*turning aside from gazing*]. No sign of the boat, and we're an hour watching.
SAUL. Not yet in sight?
DEBORAH. No.
SAUL. Curse their feeble arms!
And all the time the sickness goes on working!
Let them not bring the doctor here too late
To save my Barnaby; or if they do,

Let them not come within my sight.

DEBORAH. O God,
Dear God, send us some skill to help us soon.
Let them bring back with them cures for my sick darling.

ANOTHER WOMAN [*crouching on the ground*]. They may bring back all the skill of the town,
'Twill be no good to my dears now.

MARTIN. Woman,
You should be with your dead.

THE WOMAN. Don't tell me that.
Ah, but the way they cried all night! And I,
Knowing nothing of this new sudden illness,
What could I do? I'd naught but water for them.
Now I'm like one that comes in mazed from a storm:
And I'm afraid of them, afraid to see
The darling bodies lying there so hurt;
I'ld hear their dreadful pains crying again.
I couldn't bide it, neighbours. Let me stay
And hear you talk.

MARTIN. But you should go to them;
Dead or alive, children need their mother.

THE WOMAN. No, no, I couldn't bide it.

MARTIN. Up with you.
Stay with them till they're earth-fast. In a month
You'll grieve you shirkt seeing them all you might.

THE WOMAN [*suddenly leaping upright*]. Ah! what 's that?

MARTIN. What then?

THE WOMAN. I heard one call:
I heard one of my children calling for me.

MARTIN. Poor thing, it 's daft.

THE WOMAN [*crying out*]. Ah!

MARTIN. Why do you hold your breast?

THE WOMAN. A great qualm took me: 'twas as if a hand
Crusht in my heart. Be quiet, let me listen.—
Ah! there again, like being cut inside.—
The sickness! It has got me! Oh good God!
Yes, I will go home to my little ones. [*She walks off unsteadily.*

MARTIN. Her children need her.
1ST WOMAN. We've no help at all;
We are left alone, jail'd by river and marsh;
The malady can have all its will with us.
You don't know your plight: but I within me
Can see the thing, a ghost as grey as rain,
Fleeces of shadowy air wrapping his shape,
Tall as the winds standing up over us,
Smiling and idly bandying with his feet
This way and that the writhing bodies like
A man turns rats that have taken the bane he laid.
MARTIN. Ay, do you see that? Do you hear her, friends?
Those were no words of crippled wits, but speech
Out of a spirit full of aching sight.
She 's seen our sickness, and the look of it
Is as the wrath of God. Will you cure that?
The plague that 's on us is the blame of the Lord;
And all you think of is to get a doctor:
Do you mean him to make friends with God for you?
DEBORAH. What have we done, that anger should be poured
On us more than another town? We were
As good as any simple folk can be;
But all in an evening down it came on us,
This tearing sickness, whether made of some
Bad breath of the marsh, or blight from over sea.
And you say none can put the fever down?
ANOTHER WOMAN. The fool I was to come to such a place,
And to have children in it! A spit of clay,
Hummockt between the river and the marsh,
A fine place for a town it is! A bairn
Would know the health of such a rotten ground.
A MAN. And who can choose to build in a fair health
But the like of nobles? We must pilot and fish,
And when we've done our day upon the water,
We can but crawl above the tide, no more,
Sleep as near our trade as we dare, or else
We shall be better'd in it.

THE WOMAN. Just as well
Be in the tide as on this rick of slime:
It 's nigh as wet, nothing but washt-up ooze
And silted umber, mere marsh steadied with clay
To be a kind of mortar, not an earth.
It takes a man to build houses on slime;
And then ask women to come bed with him,
Ay, and to child, in such a filthy place.

THE MAN. Ah, don't deafen us, woman. You came blithe,
I warrant, when Matt whistled you from your Mammy.
You know there 's never choosing for us folks.

THE WOMAN. And what 's the worth of a young girl's wits?

THE MAN. Why, naught.
Same as an old one's.

MARTIN. That 's it, quarrel and snarl,
When half your people are fighting death or dead.
You're all alike for wisdom.

2ND MAN [*to the Woman*]. Why are you fasht?
'Tis we are cruelly teased with waiting so
For medicine, we with children crying in pain,——

DEBORAH. Or with a sweetheart being dragged away
By this rough dying,——

3RD MAN. Or with a childing wife
Brought wrongly to her time,—Oh Christ, that I knew
Some ease for her, even an hour's ease!

2ND MAN [*to the Woman*]. But the sickness has lowpt over all your lot.

THE WOMAN. Well and what then? There never was an ailing
With such a sudden stroke as this fiend has,
All in a minute crazing your whole flesh;
And I am flayed with fear till doctor comes
And tells us what the good thing is against it.
I lost my first bairn from your marshy air.
His life was nothing but fever from his start,
And he was gone before they signed his brow
With holy water. But had I known the place,
Would I have come? Hemm'd in behind with quags

That half the year are fens and always quick,
With nothing of a trod way going through;
No skill in all the place, parson or leech;
Five miles of river for a boat to row
To fetch in either. And here 's this pestilence
Killing us all and none knows how to cure it.
Maybe the sickness will learn some of you
The kind of place you have.

MARTIN. It 's nought to do
With anything here; it 's over the whole world.

ANOTHER WOMAN. Look at the sorrow on Saul! How that man loves
His little Barnaby.—O 'twould be cruel
If he should lose him now, with his wife gone.

2ND MAN. No more cruel for him with one child caught,
Than 'tis for me with two in the fearful risk.
Where are those lagging fellows? We should have sent
Someone who had the sickness in his house.
I would have got a doctor, if it meant
Pulling him from the bedside of the Mayor.

DEBORAH. O but my heart is dying in me, waiting;
With such a yearn of love in it, and all
Useless, a failure when 'tis needed most.
For us, with lives so hazardous, to love
Is like a poor girl's game of being a queen.
What good are all these marvellous desires
That seem to hold life in mastery? They are
Dreamt things only. Men make no more of them
Than a hawk would make of a spider's mesh, when life
Is fearfully desiring towards death.
O David, if you leave me, after our love!
You to go beyond the meaning of love,
And I, with your memory at my breast,
To stay behind in all the bitter meaning.

1ST MAN. The boat, the boat!

DEBORAH. O God be praised, they're coming!

SAUL. Have they a doctor?

1ST MAN. Have they? Have they? No!
SAUL. Not! Then by God I'll handle some of them.
DEBORAH. Why, you poor-sighted fellow, there he is!
That man in the stern will be a doctor, sure.
2ND MAN. Or some apothecary chap; what 's that
He nurses gingerly on his knees?
DEBORAH. A bag,
I think.
SAUL. Well, if he bring some skill in the bag,
Let him be doctor or apothecary,
Ay, or a barber, it's all one.
DEBORAH. O row,
Row, you are paddling!
2ND MAN. Are they on the mud?
SAUL. They might be plowing for the pace they make;
They've backbones weak as reeds.
DEBORAH. But if they had
A woman in the crew, she'd let them see
What 'tis to have your main strength in your heart:
She would not stop for spraining. O but they're slow!
[*Saul goes into his cottage.*
MARTIN. Do you think yon leech can frighten with his drugs
The fiend that 's with us? For it is a fiend,
No common smittle fever. I have gone
Into the town lately, and they told me
The whole earth's peoples have been fiercely caught
Like torn small papers in a wind, in this
Great powerful ailing. And I believe God
Has taken health out of the world.
DEBORAH. Why, then,
We are not the only plagued ones? And belike
There will be other girls with sweethearts lying
Tormented with the thing, and no help near?
And you will say God 's good!
MARTIN. I say man 's wicked.
And that 's enough for me to understand.
A MAN. What do they call the sickness?

MARTIN. Cholera
The name was in the town; and that seems like
To mean a kind of anger. But look away
From what it 's called to what the malady is.
You simpletons, I tell you all again
God 's with us here, God merciless and angry;
He has made His blame into a swinking fiend.
Has she not seen, this woman you called daft,
Seen him who bears the message, the Lord's blame?
God has given the world to one of His fiends.
A MAN. Well, it may be, but thank God here 's a doctor,
And he shall have a try at the plague for me.
[*A woman, the mother of Deborah's lover David, runs in.*
THE WOMAN. Deborah, Deborah, come! it 's terrible with him.
Ah, the poor boy is hurt so, and he 's crying,
Crying for you to come and help his heart.
DEBORAH. O, he 's not dying?
THE WOMAN. Perilous near, I think.
And now he puts his mother aside and wants
Only his sweetheart there.
DEBORAH. Run back to him:
O he must keep his hold on life; he must
Wrestle a little longer; tell him to think
Of ease stealing over his limbs, and me
Smoothing the cruelty out of his mind with love.
THE WOMAN. What, you won't come to him? How can he think
In all that pain? And you won't come?
DEBORAH. Why, see,
Here is the doctor coming, here 's the boat;
I'll stay here till he lands, and get him first.
[*She urges David's mother off.*
You'll let me have him first, won't you, neighbours?
You'll never make me lose David in death
By taking the doctor's care yourselves when he 's
Just at the utmost need of it? it would
Craze me, I know, if the thing killed David.
You'll let me have the doctor first, neighbours?

THE MADWOMAN. I see a man's life like a little flame
Clinging to one end of a burning spill;
And the man 's in the grasp of a great anger,
Who is for shaking the last glimmer of life
From off him, as you shake the fire off a match
When you would have it done with burning.
ONE OF THE MEN [*hailing the boat*]. Is he a doctor?
FROM THE BOAT. Ay; a good one too.
DEBORAH. You have been wickedly slow; we're all desperate
With waiting; row as if death reacht for you.
FROM THE BOAT. The town 's all full of doctor's work.
MARTIN. It 's true.
The life is draining away out of the people.
FROM THE BOAT. Are many more down since we left?
DEBORAH. O many,
And those that were just taken when you went
Are hanging over the last danger now.
O hurry; I'm to have the doctor first
To tend my David, for he 's worst of all.
[*A cry is heard from Saul's cottage.*
A WOMAN. Whose bairn is that?
A MAN. Saul's little Barnaby.
A WOMAN. He sounds like nearing death. O, Saul will rage
If the lad 's taken! How can it have
To do with God, this plague, that goes about
The little happy life of Barnaby?
[*Saul comes out of the cottage.*
SAUL. What 's hindering those weak fools in the boat?
They can't be rowing still?
THE WOMAN. How is the lad?
SAUL. Christ, if he should be going! Are they near?
A MAN. Just at the landing, look.
SAUL. Let him have skill
To hold my Barnaby back from dying, God!
[*He runs off towards the river* (*R.*).
A MAN. Now what 's he after? Going to lug them in?
A WOMAN. He 's in the water, up to his shoulders nearly!

A MAN. He'll swamp them!
ANOTHER WOMAN. What, will he drag the man ashore!
A MAN. He'll souse the doctor finely if he does.
A MAN. And drown his drugs maybe!
A WOMAN. Lord, but he takes
The man like a murderer.
A MAN. Nay, there 's a feat!
A MAN. That Saul 's a rare strong fellow! No one else
Standing above waist-deep could pick a man
From out a boat like a little parcel, trudge
Through mud and water holding a grown doctor
Above his head with arms stiff straightened out.
A MAN. He 's got him dry to shore.
A WOMAN. A biggish chap
He is, and yet Saul made a toy of him.
A MAN. Saul seems to pant a bit though.
A MAN. Like enough.

[*Saul comes in* (*R.*), *the Doctor walking alongside. Saul has hold of him by his arms. They all beset the Doctor.*

SAUL. Straight on, sir: you're mine first. Hands off him, now!
DOCTOR. Come, come, you're all bewildered; we must go
Quietly now about this business.
SAUL. Ay,
But first you'll go the road I'm taking you,
And that 's straight on to my house; you'll begin there.
DOCTOR. Then free my arms.
SAUL. Push on; they'll give us room
If we push hard; it 's only noise they make.
Stand back, the lot of you; out of the way,
Deborah: I'll not have him hindered now
By any of you craving skill from him.

[*Throughout this and the following, Saul, still holding the Doctor firm, is fighting his way through the press to his cottage.*

3RD MAN. Saul, Saul, my wife 's in agony.
SAUL. Leave go.

Let her have patience for a while, or else
Groan, as she pleases; it 's all one to me.
But Barnaby shall have the doctor first.

DOCTOR. Help me with this wild fellow: hold him off!

3RD MAN. Come to my wife, sir, only come and do
Something to quieten her horrible pains;
That 's all I want. O come!

DOCTOR. I will, if you
Hold off this crazy ruffian.

SAUL. Out of the road!
Am I not the strongest framed man in the place?
My Barnaby shall have some good of that,
Else he might all as well be son to limbs
As weakly strung as yours.

3RD MAN. O listen, sir.
For Jesus' sake listen: all through the night
And all this morning, I have seen my wife,
Whom I would burn for, being slowly killed
With the mere torment—God, you shall come with me.

SAUL. You fool, am I playing a game? Take this [*strikes him*]
To show you what I mean: crawl out of the way.

DOCTOR. Stop now. Leave handling me. It 's not for you
To say how I must work.

SAUL [*pulling at him*]. Come on, come on;
Or you'll be shouldered like a sack of meal.

DEBORAH. Saul, I was promised the doctor first, these folk
All promised him to me—did you not, friends?
For David's hold on life is nigh worn through
With the fierce fretting of the malady;
Now this man's skill would seize his slipping life
Back to his body again till the stress were done;
But else he'll die—Saul, my David will die.

[*Others also lay hold of the Doctor.*

SAUL. I'll not have this: you, Deborah, stand away;
It 's your fault if I hurt you. Leave go, all.
You should have been born strong, now is the time

When a man may be glad of his tough thews.

[*He has at last got the Doctor across to his cottage* (*L.*), *and thrusts him within, shutting the door on him and standing against it facing the crowd.*

In with you, sir; and if there 's any skill
Known that will better this sickness, use it well.
I'll keep the village off from hampering you.
Now let you all be quiet awhile and ruled:
Your brabblement will spoil the doctor's craft.
I have him and I'll keep him till he 's saved
My Barnaby; when he has lifted him
Back into easy breathing, he is yours;
But till I have the danger off the boy
I make not a farthing's toss for shrills and grumbles,
Let every ache the devil knows of wring
Your wives, children, and lovers. Now I know
What good my muscles are. Stand off, women!
Both kinds of women, keep well out of my reach!

A MAN. Let 's have him away from there: we are enough
To master Saul, I'm sure.

ANOTHER. Yes, rush him down,
Hustle him out of that.

ANOTHER. We've as much right
As he has to the doctor's cures.

SAUL. Ay, have you?
Here 's my right. [*Picking up an axe from the bench.*] What will you say to this?
Good heavy steel, and an edge to it, and arms
To make it speak manfully,—these are my rights,
And Barnaby's rights, to have the doctor first.
Ay, flinch, you are wise, and cower, and hold your tongues,
You'll not talk down this fellow of mine, nor me.
I warrant I'll graft a conscience on your hearts
Will hold you fearful and railed off from me,
As though I did priest's business in a church.

THE MADWOMAN [*left alone at the side away from Saul's cottage*].
They'll shirk to come at handgrips with a man

They see bragging himself as good as death;
And yet they'll all be shrivelled in an hour
By death they cannot see. Like flies on a heath
Hiding from wind they are; but there comes running
A singeing wild fire through the heather,—yes,
And they mean to put the death out with some drugs,
Could they get past a man playing at death.

[*The woman who is mother of Deborah's lover, David, runs in.*

THE WOMAN. Where 's that girl Deborah?

DEBORAH. Ah, is he worse?

THE WOMAN. What do you care whether he 's worse or not?
You were to bring me the doctor when he landed,
But you must have your gossip out before
You'll stir for David. I've long kept away
From saying this; now I'll tell you my heart:
For it is bitter to me, bitter, that he
Should put his mind on an easy wench like you,
A doxy who 's a tavern-word for freedom,
And set you in front of me. Ay, now, in his death,
Off he shrugs his mother's own hands and looks
Moaning for you, a whim of his blood, to come.

DEBORAH. Let all this be for now; is David worse?

THE WOMAN. His life 's just tottering in the sickness, like
A candle in the draught of an open door;
Ah, it 's as if his body had been wrencht
Open, and death blew in upon his soul.

DEBORAH. No hope, then?

THE WOMAN. I can hope, for I'm his mother,
And I have none but him. But if he dies,
There are always men for a free lass like you.
Hope? Yes, if now, while he still holds the plague,
Just holds the beast off from his life, he had
The help of a doctor's skill, he would come through.

DEBORAH. Saul, surely the doctor 's done with Barnaby
By now? Will you not tell him to make haste?
Saul, you've been often very kind to us,
David and me; but you'll do good to yourself

If you save David's life, and save my soul.
SAUL. You may stop talking, girl, and bide my time.
DEBORAH. But, man, do you know what you are doing now?
David is on a deadly brink, and you
Shove off his weakening hold,—you murder him
As wickedly now all as you did that.—
Nay, nay, I did not mean any hard words;
I know how madden'd you have been. But now
Barnaby has got healing; only bid
The doctor hurry over the lad's cure,
And give him to me.
SAUL. Not I; I'll have the boy
Tended as leisurely as he were a lord;
The man shan't scamp the least of his drugging,—Wounds!
I'll pay him queerly if he does.
DEBORAH. And you,
What earnings is this work like to bring you?
If David's life is broken off from mine,
What will your wages be? I can tell you.
Some day, out of hiding in your dark flesh,
Your soul will creep like a beast out of a thicket
Into the shadowless light where men see God;
And there'll be a hound of anger has been set
To wait for you; and it will fly at you:
You make yourself now game for God's hunting wrath.
Saul, there 's something sacred about lovers.
God will not easily forget the fault
Of one who parts those who are fast troth-plight.
For there is wondrous more than the joy of life
In lovers; there 's in them God Himself
Taking great joy to love the life He made:
We are God's desires more than our own, we lovers.
You dare not injure God! Think on it, Saul!—
O Saul, let me have David's love! Dear Saul, [*She kneels.*
You must not do such an immortal wrong
As wrenching my whole life back from its worship,
Murdering David's children that still sleep

Within our love. All my body and brain
Needs David. There 's no good for me beside.
The world would all be round me like an evil
If David left me: it would come in at the wound
And make me itself, drench my spirit with poison.—
[*She stands up.*
Curse you, Saul, and curse your Barnaby!
May it be the lad's death now, may yourself
Follow him into sickness, but come through
Alive and blasted by it in your heart,
All of you turned to a great hunger for sin,
That will keep you for ever as far apart
From Barnaby as God's hell is from heaven.
[*The doctor appears behind Saul in the cottage door.*

DOCTOR. The lad 's in a fair way now.

SAUL [*gripping him*]. He will not die?
Can you tell that for certain? Mind you, man,
Don't juggle any sleight of words with me.

DOCTOR. Come, come, I know my trade. His pains are gone,
The fever 's slipping out of him. Let go,
Others are needing me.

SAUL. But dare you leave him?
Is there no danger between him and health?

DOCTOR. No, no, his malady 's all but finisht now;
For this thing either suddenly turns to death
Or else as suddenly gives up. The boy
Is now as good as well.

SAUL. Barnaby 's safe?
I need not hold out longer.

DEBORAH [*to the doctor*]. O sir, make haste.
[*The Doctor goes out surrounded by Deborah and others.*
A few remain with Saul.

SAUL. My Barnaby will live.—Do you think he knows?
Did he say for sure that Barnaby would live?

A MAN. O ay, he knows. Barnaby 's through it now.

SAUL. I was afraid for him, mightily afraid.
What! where 's the doctor? Did I let him go?

My God, suppose he 's playing a dog-trick on me!
If he has swindled me! Shall I after him?
Ah, but I could not master them again.
He has broken the fear in me, and it was fear
Kept me strung upright, and the mind in me hale
And throng'd with an anger, would have thrasht you down
If you had dared me. O my spirit stormed
Within me then, I had limbs like a giant's.
But now my will crumbles into failure;
The fear has snapt, I felt it in my brain
Snap like a strand, and all my life loosen
Because it parted; and I can't mend my fear.
That 's strange, isn't it? I can't fear at all.
What made it break, and so unman my heart?
Ah, I remember, Barnaby 's going to live.

A MAN. What, Saul, man, you are reeling!

SAUL. I'm tired out
For hours it 's been with me like riding waves
That reacht higher and higher. They'll drown me now.
I'm glad you quencht so easily at my temper;
For had it come to a tussle, I dare say
You'd have found me in slack fettle, a breathless weakling.

THE MAN. Is it the sickness on you, Saul?

SAUL. I think
This body holds more sickness now than Saul.
There are wells of cold pouring out of my heart;
My thought 's all black within me. I am earth
Already, save for the business that the plague
Has left itself to do.

THE MAN. Why, then let 's have
The doctor back.

SAUL. No, others want him now;
And Barnaby will live.

THE MAN. He' s within hail,
And 'twill be hours before he 's through his job.
I'll call him back.

SAUL. What good? he said the lad was nearing health,

Did he not? Yes, I'm sure he said it.

THE MAN. Ay,
But it 's leapt from Barnaby to you; and maybe
Soon it will beat the man to loose its grip.

SAUL. Nay, it began last night, and all to-day
I've felt it burrowing deeper in my vitals;
Ay, like claws working within me, tearing
The roots of my life apart. But there was one
Main sinew was too tough for all its gnawing,
My fear for Barnaby. And now that 's given;
The lad will live: in a few days, maybe,
You'll see him playing ally-com-panny here
Or football. Yes, he'll take to football first
When he gets up; he likes a running game.
I hope this bout won't set his growth aback.
O Christ, I'm dizzy: am I standing now?
I seem falling and falling endlessly;
The air is shouting past me. I ought to pray;
But there 's no need: Barnaby will live. [*He falls.*
Matthew, Mark, Luke and John
Bless the bed that I lie on.
I'm going to swoon, I think. Lads, will you try
To carry me indoors?—quick, while I have
Some senses left. I must not go without
Saying good-bye to Barnaby.

[*They carry him into the cottage.*

[*A short pause. Deborah rushes in distraught.*

DEBORAH. Saul, you murderer, you murderer!
What? O, it 's no good hiding: come out now:
Let 's have no whimpering over Barnaby;
You've killed my David; stand out into the open,
You and your crime, and let me see you blench
To feel, at my asking, God take hold of you.

[*She sees Saul's axe on the ground, and picks it up.*

His axe! Saul 's dropt his axe! Why, this is the word
For me to give Saul, this is the word I want!

[*Battering at Saul's cottage door.*

David has sent a message to you, Saul.
Come out, and take it.

[*She stands ready with the axe lifted for striking. One of the men opens the door.*

THE MAN. Saul is dead.

DEBORAH [*staggering*]. Saul dead?
Who killed him?

THE MAN. Dead of the plague he is.

DEBORAH. The plague!
Had Saul the plague?—No, it 's afraid he is,
And shamming,—tell him I mean to see him.

THE MAN. Look there.

DEBORAH [*peering past him*]. Saul?—Saul?—
Who'ld think he'd go so sudden?

[*The axe drops from her hands.*

What fell?—O yes, he 's cheated that too, now!—
David, David, I can do nothing for you!

CURTAIN

ACT II

PERSONS

DEBORAH.
THE MOTHER *of Deborah's lover, David.*
MIRIAM, *David's younger sister.*
BARNABY, *Saul's son, now grown up.*

The living room of Deborah's cottage. Doors to bedrooms R. and L.: door into the lane at back (L.C.).
Deborah by herself, bending over a seaman's chest. She calls into the inner room.

DEBORAH. Barnaby!

[*Barnaby, grown to a young man, comes in from the bedroom.*

Your kit 's ready now, I think.
You'll need to cord it well: the lock 's not good.

BARNABY [*as he cords the box*]. Lucky for me you had this chest
put by;
I've not too many shillings.
DEBORAH. Yes, 'twas lucky.
BARNABY. You've never told me where it came from.
DEBORAH. No?—
[*She pauses a moment, then adds quietly*] This was my David's
box.—He would have gone,
Too, for a sailor; and I often lookt
To pack this box for him with things he'ld need.
I begged it from his mother when he died;
I've nothing else of his.—Well, 'tis yours now.
It 's you are off for a sailor now.
BARNABY [*rising from the box*]. That 's done;
And properly. Try the rope by the knot;
You could nigh fiddle on it.—O, it 's queer!
I can scarce think I'm off to see the world.
DEBORAH. Ay, here 's the evening come that I've watched coming
These many years.
BARNABY. You knew I'ld go?
DEBORAH. O, well!
BARNABY. But you aren't grieved with me?
DEBORAH. Why should I grieve?
The world 's made for young men. And you'll come back.
There 's that, I think, in the village will draw you home.
Often I'll see you coming through that door
With a fine swagger learnt on foreign quays.
BARNABY. Deborah, if I don't come back——
DEBORAH. Fie, now,
What sort of talk is this?
BARNABY. But I must say it.—
When in that pestilence my father died,
And I was homeless in the village, you
Took me and housed me. 'Tis so long ago
That I've no mind of it. But no one else,
I know, would have to do with me; the men
Remembered how, to keep the doctor with me,

My father cowed them like a lot of dogs,
Yes, and he with the sickness on him. And the women
Hated me as the child for whose small life
So many dead were paid.

DEBORAH. The women! Gulls
Chattering shrilly when the tide is out!
It 's true Saul seized the Doctor's skill for you,
Kept it till you were sound. But who 's to know
That those the doctor could not save had lived
If they'd been tended sooner?

BARNABY. It 's nought to me
Whether they lived or died.—But I was there
In sight of all, a living thing the folk
Could spend their bitterness on. What matters it
Whether their bitterness was lies or no?
It 's what they said that matters.—
And with their saying they'ld have smeared my life,
Made me a workhouse boy, had it not been
For you, Deborah.

DEBORAH. It 's all over now:
No one thinks of it nowadays.

BARNABY. No one
But me—and David's mother.

DEBORAH. Miriam's mother.
And Miriam takes no heart from her, I think.

BARNABY [*breaking in hastily*]. But you, who'd had through me
the dearest loss
Of all in the village, you whom my life had robbed
Of David—O I know the man he was,
I've heard the talk of who remember him—
You took me in and housed me!

DEBORAH. Barnaby!
Let be!

BARNABY. I must not let it be. For years
I've taken all your love as, I suppose,
Rich folks eat bread—without thanks or a thought
For what was nourishing me.

DEBORAH. There needed none.

BARNABY. And now—you give me David's box!

DEBORAH. Who else
Should have it?

BARNABY. I did not know it was his.

DEBORAH. What then?

DEBORAH. O Deborah, dare you give it me?
Is it only a small thing to you, this
That once was David's? If he saw you now!
If David saw you giving me, who brought
Death between you and him, this last small thing!

DEBORAH. No more, Barnaby!—You must take the box;
It means something to me.—And now I'll say
What I, too, have kept hid for many years,
Hid even from myself. While you were growing,
Our hearts quietly drew our minds to be,
Almost at unawares, brother and sister.
Now you are grown, and now to-night you are off
For the great seas of the world and a man's adventure;—
And now, Barnaby—you are my son.—
Let that be the full quittance in your thought
Of what I've done for you. Into my life
You came terribly: I dare think I'ld have
More right to claim you than your mother's pangs,
You were such an anguish to me. Yes, and I
Died then, save for a husk of living, still
Fastened about the soul perisht within me.
But now the hidden senses in my soul
Are nursed out of their dreadful grave of winter,
As rains nurse in the earth the buried plenty;
And you have put in me the power of life
Again, like a new season in the world,
You, and the joy you're bringing me.—It 's well,
Maybe, we are not used to have our speech
Deal with such things as these: but is there not,
Now that your going 's brought us to the mood,
Somewhat besides within you, you should tell me?

BARNABY [*uneasy*]. I? I've said what I had to say.—But now
I must go see some friends before I start.
DEBORAH. Yes, that you must: I will wait here for you.
BARNABY [*to himself as he goes*]. Time I was going for a sailor
indeed.

[*Barnaby goes through the door to the lane. Deborah remains, looking at the box.*

DEBORAH. He should have told me; but I know 'tis so;
I know how it is with him and Miriam,—
David's sister! O I was wrencht at first!
Cruel it was to see the signs of their love
At first: but now—am I wronging you now,
David, my David, to feel life so strong,
To be so glad that life is in my heart,
And you there in the grave? Down there so long,
My beautiful David, and the stones between us!
And I walking over you with a heart
Sweet with life!—But ageing, ageing slowly.

[*A knock at the outer door and David's mother comes in. She is now an old woman.*

DAVID'S MOTHER. They tell me Barnaby sets out to-night.
DEBORAH. They told you truth.
THE MOTHER. And you'll be lonely then?
DEBORAH. Why, not so lonely. Miriam will come
Often, and talk with me of Barnaby.
MOTHER. Miriam 's my daughter, and I'll have her mind
When once she 's free from the lad's looks.
DEBORAH. Ay, will you?
You know, then? But you will not poison her.
MOTHER. Poison? Yes, if the truth be poison, as
It must be to some folks, poison and shame.—
Ah! here will be Barnaby's box now, I dare say.
[*She looks close at the box.*] Why, this is it! I guesst this! This
is why
I came here.
DEBORAH. I was wondering why you came.
MOTHER. Miriam told me, you had found a box

Put by, would do for Barnaby. And I,
In the instant of her words, was very sure
The box would be this that was David's once.
O it 's a queer thing you should be so faithless!
But you shall have the truth now, Deborah:
And if it makes your blood burn, if it makes
The woman in you grieve like an inmost pain,
It 's you are the shame, you are the poison, not
The truth I'm giving you.

DEBORAH. It will be well
To have this out now: it must come some time.

MOTHER. Well, is it? And is this well, this last thing
You've done to David? Give his box away
To the boy for whom David's life was murder'd!
O yes, I know it 's not the worst you've done;
And I've stood by and watched you, these long years,
Wronging my son, whose living heart was all
Yours, but dead is mine only, all mine!

DEBORAH. I never wronged your son.

MOTHER. Never? O, wait!
You'll see yourself at last now as you are,
For this has fetched me out of bitter silence.
After the plague was done, and David earthed,
And when you came making your cry to me,
You forged your words so clever, I could not help
But give you this for keepsake, David's box,—
His father's, too, before him. It had been yours,
You said, to pack against his voyages.
And see who has it now! Now whose voyage
Have you been careful of, whose? Barnaby's!
The child of wicked Saul, who let my David
Die that his brat might steal the doctor's skill!
This is not such a little thing: it is
A great and dreadful thing, because it tops
So much—Girl! do you not feel guilty?

DEBORAH. No.

MOTHER. It 's a strange wonder. You watch Barnaby,

Grown to the height almost that David had,
Living here in your house as though he were
Your own blood, and you never wince as if fire
Fell on your skin, to think who was driven down
Out of the life he made so much of, ay,
Out of your life and mine, by Barnaby.
O, I have been patient, Deborah; my God,
I've had good need to be patient, seeing you,
The one who, after me, should have kept pure
David's memory, using him this way,
Fostering Barnaby! I hope the souls
See when they've gone through death, that David now
May know what faith his sweetheart keeps for him,—
Housing the boy who was his death!—and know
At last, his mother is the faithful one.

DEBORAH. O, David sees us now, be you well sure.

MOTHER. And does he see, think you, this Barnaby
Trapping the heart of his sister?

DEBORAH. Ay, at last
We've come to it.

MOTHER. Indeed we've come to it.
You know, do you, Barnaby 's drawn the girl,
My Miriam, into his wiles?

DEBORAH. She loves him.

MOTHER. She does not. How could she, David's sister, love
Barnaby? 'Tis but his looks have seized her mind.

DEBORAH. And do you mean to put yourself against
These two lives that are bound to love each other?

MOTHER. O, this is handsome talk! And I suppose
It pleases you—it will be how you keep
Your love for David still alight within you—
To think of these two coming into love.

DEBORAH. Pleases me? No; the word 's too small.

MOTHER. And this
The horriblest thing a dreaming fever could
Devise to sicken your heart! I'd rather have
The girl caught by a town-scamp, and made game of,

Than to fall in with Barnaby. Why, that
Would be as if she helpt in David's death;
Her love would be growing out of David's grave!

DEBORAH. We can't look back so far: these two must have
Their need of life; and life must still fare on
As it were burning the past things in gladness.

MOTHER. Gladness for you, mayhap: but not for me;
I still am thinking on my dead David.

DEBORAH. But if you will not reckon as I do
These matters, you will gall and break yourself,
Striving with what is not to be striven down.

MOTHER. Not myself but this wicked love I'll break,—
If love 's already upon them.

DEBORAH. And it is;
You know it is.

MOTHER. My God, I do: and I know
You're mightily glad of it,—David's sweetheart!

DEBORAH. You shall listen to me. I think I could
Never persuade your mind that it should know
How life went through me, every living moment
Making my body feel as the air must feel
When a song takes it,—how I thrilled to life
In those gone days of David loving me.——
And when I came to myself and was no longer
Senseless, after they had buried David,
I was all sealed away from the health of life;
And through my misery only came the throb
Of a huge force of pain. And then I saw
You village folk meaning to turn your grief
To malice put on that young helpless boy,
Barnaby. I stopt that; and, to be true,
Then I knew nothing why I gave the lad
My hearth. Blindly I did it; but it was
The life in me desiring joy again,
And, unknown to itself, making a way
Out of sorrow.

MOTHER. Ay, that 's your wickedness,

Not to be sorry for your David dead
Through all your time.

DEBORAH. And vex him with my grief?—
I know the strength of sorrow; but I know,
Even I know, who have such need of death,
What life can do against its sorrow, how
Lovely in gladness life can be: I have
Great joy in living now, knowing these two
Love as I loved my David.—This house lies
So close to the marsh, that I must always have
The quiet sounds in my ears the quags and pools
Whimper at night, as though the darkness were
A pain to itself; and often as I would sit
To grieve before my fire, aching within,
All wound and rankle, I would seem to be
Life shut in its narrow nature; and outside,
Surrounding me, the sighing, crying marsh
Was sorrow and darkness always calling to life.—
Then I began to take young Barnaby
Into my mind, and feel him dear to me.

MOTHER. O shameless, shameless! Listen to her, David!

DEBORAH. He 's listening; and he knows I hear the marsh
Still calling; but my heart is strong against it.
For now in the life I know, love once more
Begins—in Barnaby and Miriam!
It begins, and it shakes off the calling sorrow.
And you—you will hinder it! This life of ours,
That can fight down all the terrible strength
Of misery coming wild and fierce against it;
And, like a kindled thing, goes on in joy,
Leaving the bitter spite of all its wrong
Behind it, as a flame leaves empty ashes,—
This life you'll manage like a broken horse,
And drive with a few words in the little road
Your fanciful notions take! No, you will not.
I care not what you make of me, for I
Go on now trusting in the life I know;

I trust it to be in me a strong heart.
And I'll not spend my breath in pleading with you
For these two children, to be kind with them.
But I'll do this: I'll warn you, not to risk
What scant frail happiness you have, in hope
To match your will against the power of life
When it means making glory of love again.

[*Miriam comes in hastily with an air of trouble.*

DEBORAH. Miriam!

MOTHER. Miriam! you here in this house?

MIRIAM [*to Deborah*]. Where 's Barnaby? Where is he, Deborah?
He has not gone? I will not let him go
Without some speech with me.

DEBORAH. What have you done?
Miriam, why do you look afeared? Is this
Some quarrel you and Barnaby have made?
You've never let a whim of anger sting
Your minds, just at the hour of his leaving you?

MIRIAM. But he 's not gone? I cannot have him go
Not saying a word.

MOTHER. You will not let him go?
What do you want with words from Barnaby?

MIRIAM. O you know nothing, nothing of this: I came
For Deborah.

MOTHER. It must be hidden then
From your own mother? There is like to be
Something shameful in this.

DEBORAH. Some folly, I think:
To sour your first parting with a quarrel!

MIRIAM. But I've been waiting, hearkening all day
For him to whistle his curlew-cry without
That tells me he is there, ready for me.

MOTHER. Ho, now we know the trick: the fool I have been!

DEBORAH. What! What is this? Barnaby went from here
A moment since to find you.

MIRIAM. He did not come.

DEBORAH. Then, you'll have missed him. But look, there's his box:
He must come back for that before he starts.
You shall stay here, and mend this foolishness;
He cannot be long away, you not to be found.

MOTHER. Now this is mine; I have the say here now.
Miriam, you shall take your road with me
Back to the house. Barnaby 's nought to you,
And from this hour you'll hear no pretty curlews
Crying you to put by your maidenhood.

MIRIAM. O God, she knows! I did not think she knew!

[*She falls on her knees at the table with face in arms. A short pause follows Miriam's cry.*

MOTHER. I was looking for this; I knew we'ld find
Some shameful thing. We've had enough of words;
With me now, girl!

DEBORAH. You must not go with her,
You must not! Miriam, tell her she mistakes,
Fearfully mistakes you; and maybe then
She'll let you stay here.—What! have you no words,
Nothing to answer her? Do you not guess
What a vile thing her mind is making of you?

MOTHER. You'ld have her face me with some hardy show?
Let her weep and be ashamed. But hear me, you, [*to Miriam*]
If you stay here for Barnaby, you'll stay
Out of my house for ever.—God, my daughter
A boy's wanton! Your fine work, Deborah!
'Tis this has gladdened you, and made you shift
The sorrow you so talk of, and love life;
This is what David died for! An eye-sweet thing!
A spice for all the blab-tongues on the river!

DEBORAH. Have no heed for her, Miriam, but trust me.
Poor lass! your little quarrel is so sore on you
Her talk goes past you. But we'll make it nothing;
Stay for Barnaby, and you'll laugh at this.

MOTHER. I have no time for whiling here; come now,
Now with me home, or never try again
The door of my house or the door of my heart.

DEBORAH. Miriam, I know Barnaby's mind: stay here.

[*Barnaby comes in, but stands doubtful a short way from the door.*

MOTHER. So here 's your boy; and now you make your choice,
And it 's for ever. You will get no good
From him; his father's wicked blood is all
Too strong within him; and it is he who brought
Misery on us, and poverty so hard
That we've been beggars in the village often,
Beggars for food many a bitter day.
He killed David: put that in your heart
Beside the folly that you've played with him.
He 's made my heart sick to be sending life
Still through my brain. Now choose if he 's your lover.

DEBORAH. Miriam, it 's for you to speak.

MIRIAM [*looking up*]. Barnaby!——

[*A brief pause.*

MOTHER [*breaking into lament*]. I am alone now! I am alone with my age!
Nothing is left me out of all my years,
Nothing but grieving. Long ago they killed
My son, and now my daughter turns on me
And joins with them who've been so wicked to me.
I'll never heal of this: nothing but grieving!
O Christ, I am too old; I should be gone.

[*She shuffles through the outer door.*

MIRIAM [*rising to her feet*]. Barnaby! Barnaby! What have I done?

DEBORAH. We'll have some quiet now. And now, you children,
See if we do not set this quarrel straight.

MIRIAM. I say it is no quarrel; but for three days,
Three days, he has been careful to keep far
From seeing me.

DEBORAH. For three days! but this comes
Like thunder on me. Three days!—Barnaby!
What holds your tongue?

MIRIAM. And it 's worse than I dared
Even to think! for I did think he'ld have
Some hard word to give me; but here 's nothing.

Surely I am to blame; but he says nothing;
And I, Deborah, I'm nothing to him!——
O Deborah, make him speak to me.

DEBORAH. You must,
Barnaby, you must speak. Do you not see
It 's dreadful, you not saying a word, and standing
There with your grounded looks? Why are you sullen?

BARNABY. I would have done without this.

MIRIAM. O, to me!
Not to yourself, as though your eyes took shame
To find me; but say out to me the thing
That makes you strange against me. I am strong;
You need not think of tears: I am past tears.—
Barnaby, you are leaving me to-night!

BARNABY. Ay; and it had been better if you'd stayed
From catching at my going.

DEBORAH. But, O dear God,
What does it all mean? What is in your mind?

BARNABY. Well; you will have it then?—It 's not my fault;
Nor yours, Miriam. It just had to be.

DEBORAH. What is it? What is it?

BARNABY. I'ld liever have gone off
Without coming to this——

MIRIAM. What have I done?

BARNABY. Why, nothing.—It 's a troublesome thing to say,
A troublesome thing to know rightly the work
My mind 's been making in me.—But I know this,
Miriam: I must clean go from you to-night;
And from to-night on,—you must be done with me.

MIRIAM. You're going for a good while?

BARNABY. For good and all.

MIRIAM. What does he say, Deborah? Sure I have
Some faintness on me, and it hurts my hearing.

DEBORAH. You will get used to this. 'Tis how things go
Here in the world. You trusted in your life,
Did you not? Ay, you trusted there was joy
To carry you through life. This is what falls

To those who trust so.—But it cannot be;
The old despair cannot be coming down
On me again. Now, not for the love of me,
Barnaby, but for the love of God, say out
What it is truly we two women must
Look for at your hands now.

BARNABY. Have I not said it?—
[*With sudden impatience.*] It 's all too small for me here: it 's all crampt,
A misery of little drudging work,
With now and then some fair risk of a danger
Out on the river; and that 's the one fine thing
In this half-smothered life. And what comes then,
When we are through the danger, with a breath
That 's all sharp tingling from it? Back we come,
A penny or two in our pockets maybe, back
To this—what shall I call it? ay, a kennel,
A kennel made of mud, this penn'd village,
This knab of dirt between river and marsh.
But I'll fling free. I'll not keep stifling here.
Out in the world there 's China and the Indies,
Lands they speak of wonderfully, and capes
That ask a month of storming to get round;
All the great life of sailors, as I've heard
The pilots tell of, they who bring to dock
And through our shoals the ships that trade in the East.
And what 's the best for me if I stay here?
Grow to a pilot's wisdom, maybe; climb
In the half-light the sides of vessels, stained
With pushing through the salty weather of seas
Where the sun makes the waters burn like stone
That floors a furnace; and have some snatch of talk
With them who live what I must dream, as men
Visit a cripple bedrid in a room.

DEBORAH. I know all this; I have long seen it growing,
And there 's no harm in it. And is this all
The reason for your cruelty,—your want

To go a-vagabonding with the sailors?

BARNABY. No, 'tis not all; but it is all my words
Can fashion of the mind in me. That life
Which leaps so keen awake within my brain
When, like a hatred that has been in hiding,
Danger blows on the fishing fleet, and we
Must fight to win ashore, that power of life
Is what has taken a strong hold on me.
I must go out and let it spend itself
Somewhere—somehow—I don't know rightly; yet
This is plain as a candle-flame in darkness,—
I'm to have done with being hampered here.

DEBORAH. And this girl—why should you not come back to her,
When you have seen the world?

BARNABY. Well, I've myself
To please about that first. I'll not be made
A mammet for you women to play games with.

DEBORAH. I understand your meaning now. You've done
The wicked thing by her.

BARNABY. And what did she
But please her own mind in it?

MIRIAM. O God! God!

DEBORAH. Why, you should smile when you drink gall, Miriam,
For there 's naught else your soul will drink of life.

BARNABY. O, but it 's not so easy for me to leave her!
A deal of comfort calls me here; and she
Keeps all of it,—she 's all the little close
Sweetness of comfortable wonted life
Which would grip firm about me; and it's that—
That is the thing I must be cruel with;
And to myself, too, I must be cruel.

DEBORAH. And you care naught for what may happen to her?

BARNABY. And what should happen to her?—what should happen? [*Deborah looks steadily at Barnaby.*

BARNABY. Deborah, leave us a moment.

[*Deborah goes into the inner room*

I suppose

That you've let on about our foolishness?

MIRIAM. Foolishness! It was sacred to me.

BARNABY. Leave that,
And tell me. Is there aught like to come of it?

MIRIAM. And if there was, what would it mean to you?

BARNABY. Why—why, I think—I should come back to you.

MIRIAM. You may go with an easy mind then. No,
There 's nothing like to come of it—nothing.

BARNABY. Well, the boat 's waiting at the jetty now
To row me and my traps up to the dock——

[*He hesitates a moment, then suddenly picks up his box, shoulders it, and makes off through the door into the lane.*

DEBORAH [*coming in from the bedroom*]. He 's gone?

MIRIAM. Gone.

DEBORAH. And I thought my ears surely lied to me, when
They heard the door latch. And he 's gone!

MIRIAM. Deborah! He has left me, Deborah!

DEBORAH. And David loved her so, she but a bairn!—
Saul and Barnaby! David and his sister!

MIRIAM. Deborah!—I am with child.

CURTAIN

ACT III

PERSONS

DEBORAH.
MIRIAM.
AN OLD WOMAN OF THE VILLAGE.
BARNABY.

The living room in Deborah's cottage. Night: a ship's lamp burning. There is the sound of a wind outside. Deborah and a Midwife, an old woman of the village.

OLD WOMAN. That was a cry of wind! You'ld think the night
Was a thing living, when it cries like that:
Sure it 's some anger breaking out in the world,

Such wildness of the air skirling aloud.
Do you never fear for staving of your windows?

DEBORAH. They need good hasps: we get the strength of it here.

OLD WOMAN. Ay, you must be the first thing for the wind
To seize after its crossing of the marsh,
Where nothing stands at all.

DEBORAH. And I think often
The wind comes out of the open marsh a spirit
Raving to find naught, all those empty miles,
To throw itself against, and feeling only
Its own rage in the air. But when it lights
Upon these walls, then there 's glee in the wind:
Then sowse it hurls on us its whole weight of speed,
And there'll be yells and bullying at the door,
And a din aloft like devils blowing trumpets;
And then 'twill fall to hissing round the eaves
And fumbling at the thatch for a way in;
While seemingly, for a blood-beat or two,
Half of the gale crouches a short way off;
And then a hundred beasts of wind leap howling,
And pounce upon the roof with worrying paws,
And roar to feel the walls not shaking down.

OLD WOMAN. Lord, if I thought the wind alive as that
I should be feared of it.

DEBORAH. But I must make
Some silly game with the outcry of the wind,
Likening it to dragons and a pack
Of wing'd beasts playing their glad rage on the house
With snarls and screams and gruntles. Else maybe
I should be feared of the wind indeed.

OLD WOMAN. What, ghosts
Or fiends would you hear clamouring in it?

DEBORAH. Nay;
I have no mind for ghosts.—It 's all a game,
Whether you make the wind hunger and fury,
Or, as some do, a fearful crying despair.
But what the wind means truly to my soul

Is something I must cower and shrink from knowing.—
You will soon hear my game, though: there'll be beasts
Lowing to break through on us to-night,—
Ay, to-night, when Miriam needs quiet.

OLD WOMAN. I vow 'tis growing a rare pace indeed;
Hark at it! It will be a great wind soon.
Enough drones through the framing of your door
Already, to scrub the chaps upon my skin.

DEBORAH. And markt you that? Is not my game the thing?
That mew against the window must have come
From somewhat like a beast, went flying past.
And there, to try if the latch be fasten'd well;
It is like horns at the door.

OLD WOMAN. And a horn in the chimney.

DEBORAH. It would come in, the wind, it would come in!
Listen! Out there, upon the sill of the door
It moans like a wounded thing or bitterly clemm'd;
But that won't serve. And now, up with you, wind,
Now bay, shriek till you tear your throat, and thrust
A shoving flank fiercely against the door,
And curse the bolt and hinges! I know the way.—
Is Miriam asleep?

OLD WOMAN. A while ago
She slept, poor lass, tired with crying, as sound
Almost as her baby, that did nothing else
Save sleep. But this mad fool of a wind is like
To shout her broad awake again.

DEBORAH. Best go
And see if she be stirring.

[*The Old Woman goes into the bedroom.*

Yes, and me,
Mad fool of a wind, you are like to shout
Desperately awake again. O wind,
You are too loud! If I'd the heart for prayer
Would I not ask the God that men call good
To keep His winds from pouring their great strength
Where I must hear them rushing and destroying!

For I'm all coward again, when the wind 's up;
The noise of it, and the fierceness of its pleasure,
Sound into my soul. I am like one
Who falls beneath the running of a crowd,
The wind has grown to such a meaning for me!—
Helpless, utterly helpless, underneath
The speed and outcry and the anger of joy,
The merciless onward-thronging power of life
With which God fills the places of the earth,—
Helpless, all overcome in my desires,
And trodden down by that main storm of life,
Am I, when the wind is pouring over me.

[*The Old Woman comes in from the bedroom.*

OLD WOMAN. We'll have a fearful night with her, I doubt.

DEBORAH. Has the wind roused her?

OLD WOMAN. It has stirred her sleep
So, that she tosses in a sobbing dream,
And mutters of the hounds baying far-off,
And casting round to find her baby's soul.
She will wake soon; and then we'll have some work.

DEBORAH. O, if it had been a living child, I think
Miriam might have lifted up her heart,
That now is gone so low.

OLD WOMAN. 'Twas bound to die,
Her bairn. She chose a bad year for her childing.
You, a maid-woman, little know these things;
But this is what we call a seventh year.

DEBORAH. How seventh?

OLD WOMAN. In the wild countries of the world,
The bears and tigers whelp their little ones
But once in every seven years; and then,
Through all the twelve months that the beasts are bearing,
Women have cruel childbeds; and the bairns
Are very like to die.

DEBORAH. I hate these tales.
Life has enough of evil without them
To fill the unknown corners of it with fear.

OLD WOMAN. Ah, well, I know; I had a seventh year child;
She died before I got my feet again.
DEBORAH. Here 's Miriam now with a mind like blown burning,
Tortured so by one of these wicked tales.
OLD WOMAN. The Gabriel Hounds?
DEBORAH. I wish I knew the fool—
A woman sure enough—who first would make
The calling of wild geese in the night-wind
A pack of hounds yelping after the souls
Of stillborn babies and unchristened men.
OLD WOMAN. How if 'twere mother Eve? And are you sure
They're only wild geese? I believe 'tis hounds,—
Gabriel Hounds.
DEBORAH. Ay, coursing souls, no doubt.
OLD WOMAN. They do hold something mighty hot in chase;
You may tell that from the fierce way they bark.
DEBORAH. The fools we women are!
OLD WOMAN. That was not wind!
That was a hound's tongue! Deborah, you heard?
The beagles out of hell are loose in the wind,
The Gabriel Hounds are running wild to-night!
O, now, God rest the little one's soul: he died
Unchristened, and the Gabriel Hounds are out!
Here we two sit and warm us at the fire,
And yonder in the darkness and the wind
The little soul of Miriam's stillborn child
Runs crying from the mouths of the Gabriel Hounds!
DEBORAH. I heard it: the sharp horning of wild geese
On their night-journey. O, it matters not
Whether 'tis geese or Gabriel Hounds indeed;
'Tis hounds, the beagles of hell, to Miriam.
And they are preying after her child's soul,
Chasing his naked spirit down the wind
And famishing to have him in their greed.
God, let her sleep!
OLD WOMAN. Again! the yelping falls
Through the wind 's rushing like a stone through water.

DEBORAH. Ay, 'tis fearfully clear.
OLD WOMAN. And hark again!
The night above us must be full of the fiends.
DEBORAH. I've seen me listening on blowy nights
All the dark hours to the Gabriel Hounds
Yelping and yelping over me. My heart,
If they were really hounds chasing a soul!

[*The door of the bedroom* (*R.*) *suddenly flings open and Miriam, wearing a nightdress, totters into the room.*

DEBORAH. Christ, she has heard them!
OLD WOMAN. Now the work begins.
MIRIAM. How long have the Gabriel Hounds been calling?
OLD WOMAN. What?
Gabriel Hounds? Honey, there 's no such thing;
There 's naught but a sounding wind at work in the night.
MIRIAM. Deborah, you won't lie to me? How long
Have they been running in the air and baying?
DEBORAH. 'Tis only flights of geese.
MIRIAM. All lies, all lies!
Everyone in the world lies!
OLD WOMAN. You'll catch cold;
Come to your bed.
MIRIAM. What should I do in bed,
You fool, when that hounding rings in the night?
O what a wind to perish a baby's soul!
But I can't hear the hounds; was it all dream?
DEBORAH. A silly dream, indeed; there 's only wind.
MIRIAM. No! O, they will lie for ever! There they sound!
And there 's a hunger on them, a yelping hunger;
They have a soul in sight, and they're close to him, close.
And there! a scream came shrilling through their cries;
Was it not like the fear of a baby's soul?
Let me out, Deborah, let me out, to see
What soul the Gabriel Hounds will tear to-night?
The whole night 's fell with the hunting of a soul.
DEBORAH. Dear lass——
MIRIAM. The door! there's trying at the door!

OLD WOMAN. Only the pushing wind.
DEBORAH. Who'ld be at the door?
MIRIAM [*low*]. It will be the huntsman of the Gabriel Hounds.
DEBORAH. Why should he come in here?
MIRIAM. Not coming in,
Not coming in, but guarding my way out,
Lest I should save my baby's soul from his hounds.
OLD WOMAN. Well, someone 's coming in.
[*The outer door is seen to be slowly opening.*
MIRIAM. Ay, it 's the huntsman!
He knows I mean to save my baby; now
He 's coming to destroy me, that his hounds
May run my baby down and feed on him.
You'll help me against him, Deborah?—Ah, no!
'Tis not the hunstman; 'tis a living man.
[*The outer door has been blown wide open by a gust of wind and Barnaby comes in painfully, as infirm. Deborah stares at him in amaze. The Old Woman has her arm round Miriam.*
BARNABY. Miriam!—
Miriam, what ails you?
MIRIAM. Have you come through the night?
BARNABY. For you I have come, Miriam.
DEBORAH. Ay, out of the wind!
MIRIAM. And did you scan the wind, as you came through?
BARNABY. You cannot tell what fearful things have fought
Against me in the wind. Look, I am trembling;
I am like ridden down under their noises.
MIRIAM. What are your fearful things? Hounds? Were they black hounds
With mouths frothing white flame and drawing it
After them, like loose rags of fiery manes
Seized by the wind?
BARNABY. Hounds? No, there were no hounds;
'Twas a man's voice I heard, a man who 's dead.—
Shut the door, Deborah; keep out that dreadful wind.
[*Deborah mechanically does his bidding.*

DEBORAH [*as she comes from the door*]. Out of the wind you have
come back to us!

BARNABY. And broken I come back to you, Deborah;
And to you, Miriam. Have you no good word
To comfort me? I tell you I am sick;
You cannot see it on me, for it is
My mind is wounded. You must care for me,
Miriam.

MIRIAM. Are you sure there were no hounds?

BARNABY. What does she mean?

MIRIAM. 'Tis Gabriel Hounds I mean.
Would you be looking up into the wind
As you came near the house? They'ld be, most like,
Nosing round and around, with their great heads
Stoopt close to where their feet made floor of the air;
Or maybe coming at a skeltering pace
With lifted heads baying along the wind.
Ay, you would hear them if you did not see them.
You did not hear their tongues?

DEBORAH. Answer her.

BARNABY. No.

MIRIAM. Nor see somewhere a little cowering soul?
Nor hear a whimpering like a frighten'd baby?

BARNABY. No, no.

MIRIAM. Then for a while he must be safe.
Hold me now; my senses all are fainting.

[*They are supporting Miriam into the bedroom.*

BARNABY. Miriam!—Don't take her from me, Deborah.
I am broken, Miriam, the spirit in me
Is a hurt thing, a cowering hurt thing.—
O let her listen to me, let her listen!

[*Deborah and the Old Woman have led Miriam off.
Deborah returns at once.*

DEBORAH. You must not stay here. We've ado enough
Without you coming back. Why come you back?

BARNABY. Miriam did not know me, Deborah!
You would not let me tell her all my need.

DEBORAH. Why come you back?
BARNABY. For Miriam, I say.
What is it so strangely ails her?
DEBORAH. She had a child.
BARNABY. A child! A child of mine? It cannot have been
My child.
DEBORAH. You beast!—Yes, Sir, a child of yours.
BARNABY. O, no!—Am I to believe this?
DEBORAH. Even now
You saw her and the horror in her eyes:
What 's her mind doing with the Gabriel Hounds
But making them fill the wind with their loud hunger
For her stillborn unchristen'd baby's soul?
BARNABY. God help me! Can I get forgiveness from her?
DEBORAH. O the guilt is not all yours, Barnaby,
Nor half of it yours. I have made this evil
That is devouring Miriam's spirit alive.
I was the one, I thought, when David died,
Who would find life a poison of anguish; now
Trying to make a health of life through you,
I've made it strike into Miriam's heart.
Now David sees the sister he so loved
Caught into madness and pain fasten'd to her
For all the days she'll have. And it is I thrust
The madness and the pain upon her soul,
I whom he also loved, and might have trusted! . . .
Hark at that wind! the whining joy it has
To harm what stands against it, is a sound
Terrible now to me; it 's life in the world.
But fearfuller shouting even than that in the wind
Miriam hears: she hears the tongues of hell.
Here are enough bad things, without her finding
You in the house. You shall go out from here.
BARNABY. You must not turn me out; not into the wind,
Deborah; don't make me face the wind again.
DEBORAH. You fear the wind? You who have given the wind
A voice to hound Miriam into madness,

And to my heart a meaning like a sword?

BARNABY. I've done nothing wrong to you, Deborah.

DEBORAH. You have made life an utter evil to me.

[*Barnaby sinks on a chair and covers his face.*

Barnaby! Barnaby! O, are you crying?
Have I made you cry?

BARNABY. It was your doing;
I felt you wishing me to love the girl.

DEBORAH. Stand up now; you are not the one to weep.
You must go now the way you came, and quickly.

BARNABY. I will not go into the wind again.
Do you know what I hear in the wind? A man,
With the ribs of his breast crusht like a trodden hamper,
Lying three days crampt in a boat, and thirst
Terrible on him, and he for ever groaning;
Through the great noise of wind and spitting waves
That drench his wounded skin with brine, groaning
All the cold days and nights until at last
He dies; and hastily we pitch him out,
Then curse ourselves for throwing food away.
And still his torment frightens me in the wind;
Under the shrill of it, my ears still have him
Panting his cruel breath: he keeps on groaning.

DEBORAH. We've heard nothing of this. When were you wreckt?

BARNABY. I cannot tell you that. I was clean crazed
When the steamer found us. I'm the only one
Come through alive; and it 's haunted I am,
Haunted asleep, and when the wind is up,
Fearfully haunted. It falls on me again
All in a throng: the sails blow out like guns,
And like a noise of fiercely burning sticks
The rigging slats; and then the ship lies smother'd
Under the mainmast cropt off at the deck
As if it were a thistle; and, pinn'd beneath it,
The mate screams sharp and thin through the yelling gale.
And then—who knows how many starving days

Of cold, hunger, and thirst, in an open boat?
'Tis those days haunt me, all those days of starving;
They keep awfully driving through my brain
Round and round, like swinging speed of wheels. . . .
I was carried to hospital, and there
It must have been for weeks they kept me lying.
They say I'm mended now as much as may be.
But they don't know of Miriam. She will cure me;
She'll quench this frantic work that fills my brain.
With her beside me I might sleep, and not
Always be starting upright from my bed,
Bitten by stinging agony of dreams.

DEBORAH. Now God forgive me! Am I glad of this?
No, no; not glad. And yet a kind of ease—
God pardon it—makes way upon my heart,
Now that I see you here so pitiable.
You and the mastery life had in you
Twice to destroy my spirit and break my heart,
You come to wreck, makes me strangely quiet!
Like, when the river 's rough with snatch of squall,
The pour of the tide incoming from the sea
Forces a smoothness on the choppy water.—
You bring me the work of what is stronger than life!

[*The calling of wild geese is heard.*

Quiet, said I?—This is but half done yet:
There 's Miriam still, and the Gabriel Hounds!
They sound again. You must not cumber us,
Nor must her mind be hurt with seeing you.
Barnaby, you can't lodge with us to-night.

[*She goes to the outer door and sets it open, waiting for him to go through.*

BARNABY. But the wind 's worse than ever! No, Deborah,
You shall not put me into its power again.

[*The wild geese call again.*

DEBORAH. Come, gather your wits; Miriam's first with me.

BARNABY. You don't know what the doctor warned me of;
'Tis your mind 's wounded, says he, not your body;

You take good care of being distrest and frighten'd.
Those were his own words.

DEBORAH. I say, Miriam 's first.
The mastery here is ours, I think; you've come
To the wrong house for tenderness.

BARNABY. But the mate!
He 's waiting out there, he and his groaning breath,
Waiting to creep behind me and groan in my ears.
Not into the night, Deborah, the night that 's full
Of terrible windy noises!

[*The wild geese call again. Miriam is heard crying out from the bedroom.*

DEBORAH. Now no more!
How should your cowardice move me? Am I
To pit my woman's force against you? Quick:
The door 's been open long enough; the hounds
Call fearfully through it.

[*The door of the bedroom suddenly opens and Miriam appears struggling with the Old Woman.*

OLD WOMAN. I cannot hold her.

BARNABY. Miriam, I've come back to you, and she 's
For driving me out again. Say you want me!

MIRIAM. They're baying after him again: the Hounds,
The Gabriel Hounds are murdering my baby.

DEBORAH. Quick, Barnaby! Go before she knows you.

OLD WOMAN. God save you, you've the door wide open on us!
Close it, and come and help me: she 's gone wild.
We'll have her running into the midst of the marsh,
And that 's sheer drowning on a night like this.

DEBORAH [*as she helps the Old Woman to hold Miriam*]. Close the door, Barnaby: what keeps you there
So stupid?

BARNABY. I durst not go too nigh the door.
But let me face her: she can't help but know me.
Miriam, here am I, Barnaby, come for you!

MIRIAM. Are you all deaf? I should think a viper would hear
The way they're yelping and the way he screams.

Leave go! I must be there to put myself
Between those ravening hounds and my child's soul.
O, Deborah, leave go, leave go! They must
Have nearly run him down.

OLD WOMAN. What could you do
If you went out? It 's in the air they run.

MIRIAM. Perhaps I'ld draw them after me, and let
His frighten'd soul hide somewhere in the dark.
O, I'm not feared of the Gabriel Hounds, but he
Is shrieking from them.

DEBORAH [*to Barnaby*]. Can you not shut the door?

BARNABY. He 's there! Behind the door-post there he waits,
The man that haunts me with his dying voice.

MIRIAM [*she stops striving to free herself*]. Don't keep me fast in the house, Deborah!
Let me just try to draw the hounds away
From chasing, chasing the starved little soul:
They'll easily lose him in such a black wind.
O surely you hear him crying out his terror!
He 's all alone, and the hounds after him;
What should I do, his mother, listening here
To him hunted along the wind?—Again
They yelp! Then they've not caught him yet, the hounds!
And I know their lips are grinning from their teeth
Fiendishly in their rage of hunger.
[*She begins fiercely struggling again*
I'll kill you if you will not loose me.
You there, you man, whoever you be,
Find me a knife and put it in my hands.
There 's a soul out there, a baby's soul,
The Gabriel Hounds are hunting through the wind;
You may hear them baying, and they're fearfully
Close on their prey; and it 's a baby's soul.
I knew him alive beneath my heart
But dead I brought him into the world,
And God cares nothing for his soul.
And now he 's alone with night and wind

And the Gabriel Hounds——

[*She suddenly breaks free and runs through the outer door. Deborah and the Old Woman follow her.*

OLD WOMAN [*as she goes*]. She 's making for the marsh; we'll never catch her.

[*Barnaby gazes stupidly through the open door into the windy darkness. There follows a pause of silence. Then the Old Woman comes back alone.*

OLD WOMAN. She 's gone.
Straight for the middle of the marsh she made;
No living hand could save her. O, she ran
So swift, and calling as she went out loud,
Bent almost double for the strength of wind,
I could not have believed the like. My breath
Is almost blown out of my poor body!
Pray God Deborah 's got some brandy here.
Poor lass! her path would take her right to the worst
And deadliest quaking mire of the whole marsh;
'Twould swallow her before she knew her feet
Had lost firm ground. Why is not Deborah back?
If the mire stifles her, she 's but herself
To blame; no living hand could save the girl.

CURTAIN

PHOENIX

TO
JOHN DRINKWATER

PHOENIX

PERSONS

TWO SOLDIERS.
THE QUEEN.
AMYNTOR, the King.
RHODOPE, the bought woman.
PHOENIX, the Prince.

The Action is placed in a town on the coast of Northern Greece, in the times before the Trojan War.

The Scene is the roof of the King's palace: a white marble space with a low wall round the three sides visible. Against the back wall a marble bench. The entry from the stairs up from the palace is at the front of the stage in the middle: a well with low walls on three sides, the opening facing the audience. In either corner at the back is a watch-tower, each with a narrow flight of stairs up from the roof. The back part of the stage is overspread with a blue awning, stretched just below the top of the watch-towers: so that sentinels in these, while visible to the audience, are not seen by those on the roof below. Between the back wall and the awning a view of headlands and the sea.

ACT I

Afternoon. Very bright sunlight strikes the awning. Under the awning the stage is empty: two soldiers on duty, one in each tower.

1ST SOLDIER. Now they have warpt her clear: now she begins
To feel her feet—her sea-legs, you might say.
2ND SOLDIER. Very like feet they look, the blades of the oars;
Tiny, laborious, steadily creeping feet:
She 's just a water-gnat with dozens of legs.
1ST SOLDIER. And seems from here to matter, as she crawls
Toiling so small over the sea's blue light,

As much as if we watcht a black fly crawl
Over the blue awning.

2ND SOLDIER. Ay, but she knows
She'd best be gone: those oars of hers, I'm sure,
Spurn at the water till they bend. See now
The glittering white fuss she threshes round her!

1ST SOLDIER. Now ship oars and set sail! You have the mole
Fairly to windward.

2ND SOLDIER. She hears you! Up she hawls
Her shaking canvas, dusky as her hull.

1ST SOLDIER. That 's what I like to see: keep a taut sheet,
You steersman with the jewel in your hat
That flashes even to here.

2ND SOLDIER. She 's away now.
And now her flight grazes the gleaming water
As if she were a black wild duck that skims
Glancing the waves a long way before settling.

1ST SOLDIER. The bird has left a fine chick in our keeping.

2ND SOLDIER. One pirate told me, if they'd a clear month
Dealing in girls at the price the king paid,
They'ld never drink the profits in two years.

1ST SOLDIER. Good sailing, you black pirates, and good cheating!

[*The Queen comes up through the stairway.*

QUEEN. What do you shout for? What is there in sight?

1ST SOLDIER. Only the ship of the Sidonian pirates
Putting to sea.

QUEEN. They have my curse among them:
They do not know what kind of supercargo
I have sent voyaging with them out of my heart.
They are the men who've taken plague on board,
And sail off gay, to find, some mid-sea morn,
An evil god quietly sitting above them
On the high stern, and smiling like a hunter,
Enchanting them to feel like feeble dreams;
And where he looks and smiles a sailor drops
Festering in the sunlight.—But you are to watch
The land, not the sea-faring.

1ST SOLDIER. Nothing to watch,
My lady, on the land, coming or going.
QUEEN. Fools, you've dazzled yourselves, staring against
The brightness of the sea—the bright ill-luck,
The tinsel-gay malignity that still
Keeps lapping at the earth. Look to the land;
Look hard and tell me that you see the Prince
Galloping: he must feel me needing him!—
I am ill-used! Phoenix to stay so long
Abroad on his first hunting, and I then
To be so fiery-parcht with need of him!—
Well, have you lookt? Do you strain your eyes with looking?
1ST SOLDIER. Nothing at all, my lady, coming or going.
QUEEN. Are you blind-folded? I will look myself.

[*She goes up into one of the watchers' posts above the awning, where she is not seen from below, though in sight of the audience.*

Presently Amyntor and Rhodope come up through the stairway.

AMYNTOR. Out of breath, sweetheart?
RHODOPE. Me out of breath?—You are.
AMYNTOR. A little. But you'll call this worth a climb.
This is my pleasant place; and here we'll keep
A kind of heaven, where we shall find our moods
Made one with things. For look how white and smooth
Idleness has become a marble place;
And this is our day-dreaming passion glowing
Over it, this blue and shadowy light.
O coloured like the summer of the gods
Our life shall be up here; here shall it pause
Like that immortal fortune of the gods
In unconcerned perfection of ourselves.
No world 's here left for love to gaze upon
But what must seem love's imagery—the blue
Trembling flame of the sea's infinite gleam,
And clouded snows that pace about the air
With towering motion, breathing shadowless light

RHODOPE [*yawns*]. Ah—La!
The bench is comfortable and the view pretty.
But not all day up here, surely!—A goddess,
When she can wear the love of a wealthy god,
Needs to show off.

AMYNTOR. Well, so you shall; my love
Shall blaze upon you: gold and emerald
And ruby, and silk as bright as summer streams.
I'll clothe you in a god's delighted desire.

RHODOPE. That sounds all right. But I must choose the things.
Finery on me, and all the other women
Staring and nudging!—You can have the clouds.—
There 's just one thing I have against your heaven.
It seems to me, gods should not feel beneath them
The devils in the cellars.

AMYNTOR. What do you mean?
What devils?

RHODOPE. The Queen's eyes: they are the devils
That live a burning life under our heaven.—
Why, do not think I fear her. Queens don't fight,
And nothing scares me but a fighting woman.
Yet it 's uneasy, feeling they burn beneath me.

[*They are seated on the bench between the two watchers' posts at the back. The Queen steps down from her look-out and suddenly stands before them.*

QUEEN. You're wrong, bought woman: they burnt above you then.

RHODOPE [*in a little shriek*]. Ow!—[*Then she laughs and shrugs.*]
This is the poorest heaven I have heard of.

AMYNTOR [*to the Queen: blusterous*].
What are you sneaking here for? Leave me alone:
I will have no one breaking in on my pleasure.
What is it you're about? Spying?

QUEEN. Yes, spying
To see if Phoenix is not coming home:
I've much to say to him.

RHODOPE. Phoenix? Who 's he?
QUEEN. My son, and his.
RHODOPE. O, are you old enough
To have a grown-up son?
QUEEN. To have a son
Who 's old enough himself to be a father;
So you can call me granny if you like.
RHODOPE. I don't need you to learn me to call names:
You are the woman the King has done with.
QUEEN. And therefore he bought you: it 's to be hoped
The pirates did not swindle him in you
As blankly as they did over those rugs—
Threadbare trash!
RHODOPE. Eh! We did have a laugh
About those rugs!
QUEEN. 'We did'?—So you were all
Good friends together?
RHODOPE. Well, why not?—But then
What would a man know about buying rugs?
QUEEN. Or this man about buying girls?
RHODOPE. But see
The bargain he has made!
AMYNTOR. Enough of this!
RHODOPE. Girls—that 's a thing he 's wise about!
AMYNTOR. No more!
QUEEN. Then he 's been mighty quiet learning it,
And kept it hid.
RHODOPE. Yes, you would see to that:
Poor man!
QUEEN. I did!
AMYNTOR. I'll not be troubled here!
Go!
QUEEN [*to Rhodope*]. As for you, after so long on shipboard
Salt fare 's a feast you like?
RHODOPE. Salt?
QUEEN [*pointing to Amyntor*]. This old flesh
Salted white with years.

AMYNTOR. Go down!

[*The Queen moves towards the stairs.*

RHODOPE [*calling after her*]. I like
What I can get. Besides, he 's only grizzly.—

[*The Queen goes down the stairs.*

[*To Amyntor*]. Am I really the first? Well, you've been good!

AMYNTOR. So! Time has paid a visit to the gods,
Time that is for ever a thing past,
And gone down full of grudges, to keep up
Her trifling stir of dust on the dry earth,
Cancelling still with tarnish of her hands
The gleam of every moment as it flies:
And we stay here, idling immortally!

1ST SOLDIER. I see a dust that may be riding men.

RHODOPE. Bless me, there 's someone there still!

AMYNTOR. Only soldiers:
They always have a watch up there.—Keep quiet!

[*Shouting up to the sentry.*

1ST SOLDIER. It will be the prince Phoenix and the hunt.

AMYNTOR. No matter if it is: don't bother me.—
I will be now nothing but my own pleasure.
I've been mere senseless duty until now,
Like blundering in a mist. But over me
You dawn: at your first glance my foggy air
Spangled with particles of whitening gold;
Now that bewilderment of milky fire
Clears to a blaze of morning in my eyes—

1ST SOLDIER. Now I can see: the Queen must know. It is
Phoenix, it is the Prince!

2ND SOLDIER. And he comes galloping,
Galloping hard, far ahead of his troop;
Though all of them are stretcht with speed as though
Hornets hung on their horses' quarters.

1ST SOLDIER. The Queen
Should know.

2ND SOLDIER. One of us should go tell the Queen.

AMYNTOR. Silence!

1ST SOLDIER. I'll find the Queen.

AMYNTOR. You stir from there,
I'll hang you by the heels for a whole day.
What, leave my roof unwatcht?—now no more noise.

RHODOPE. Is there a bustle like this always in heaven?
We might be at the docks. I thought we were
Gods on the noiseless top of all the world.

AMYNTOR. We shall be quiet now.—O there 's a ghost
Of earthly sound roaming the air of heaven;
Else would the gods forget what misery
Must come to life only to feed their bliss.
So here: those are not men to us: they are
Mere rumours of the care that frets beneath us,
Reminding our unaltering delight
Still to be fired with an amazed self-love.

RHODOPE [*trying to see the soldiers*]. I wonder what these rumours look like.

AMYNTOR [*drawing her back*]. Ghosts
To us: now nothing lives in the whole world
But you and I; for only love is life,
And we have in a mesh of exquisite sense
Caught all the fire and sweetness that is love.
Our life is brightness now that will not take
The touch of earth, no more than dust pollutes
A blade of forging steel,
When from the coals it comes
Blinding hot, inspired with sparkling glory.
Yet are we also life
Steept in a love as sweet
As candied flowers or fruits drencht in honey.

RHODOPE. Why, that 's it: I was wondering what heaven lackt.
Sweetmeats, of course: I love honey-drowned fruit.
Can we have some brought here?

AMYNTOR. You are a child.—
[*To the soldiers.*] Come down, one of you.

[*1st Soldier enters from the look-out.*

RHODOPE. Quite a handsome ghost.

AMYNTOR. Ask for the Queen's best candy-stuff—
1ST SOLDIER. The prince
Phoenix is just alighting at the gate.
RHODOPE. O, I am tired of Phoenix!
AMYNTOR. Do you know
What sometimes chances to a nimble tongue?
They stretch it out with pincers and then leave it
Skewered, to loll full length and take the air.
Bring me the sweet things instantly.
RHODOPE [*detaining him*]. And wine,
Amiable ghost; the queen's best wine as well,
Some golden wine; and for the candy, figs
Or cherries, or sharp-sweet quinces best of all.
Ply those excellent legs as if you were running
Sturdily out of a fight, and back again
As if you had heard your side had won.
AMYNTOR. No words:
Instantly now! [*1st Soldier exit downstairs.*]
RHODOPE. Well?—You were saying something.
AMYNTOR. You never shall tell me what you have been, the things
You've suffered, before this—
RHODOPE. Why should I suffer?
I am not one to suffer things, unless
You would call being hungry suffering:
It never spoilt my looks though.
AMYNTOR. Not a hint!
I will not have it. You never lived till now.
RHODOPE. What! Never lived?—There 's one thing I can do,
And that is, live!
AMYNTOR. You never lived till now:
Understand that—never till now!—How could you,
Since you were but delight love had imagined,
Wandering phantasmal like a dream
That cannot find a dreamer. But love knew
I was the vacant sleep waiting for you
To glide into surprising presence there

And shine alive at last. Love brought you to me,
Gave you the dream's desire to be dreamt and known;
And like the god that dreams this summer earth
My life divinely sleeps, in effortless
Lucid ecstasy of imagination:
Dreaming your loveliness, touching you, breathing you,
You who exist because my love can dream you.

[*Phoenix rushes in, calling aloud.*

PHOENIX. Mother, where are you? Where is she, Father?—
O Father,
I've killed a lion! And I was all alone——

AMYNTOR. Not so much noise, dear boy, not so much noise.

PHOENIX. I must tell Mother.

AMYNTOR. Why, yes; you run and find her.

PHOENIX. No one was with me: mine was the only spear
Toucht him. The thicket where I was standing watch
Burst in front of me with a deafening crackle
Like dry wood mightily flaring, and the beast
Came blazing on me, a leap of yellow flame.

AMYNTOR. Yes; and now, Phoenix——

RHODOPE. O, so this is Phoenix?

AMYNTOR. Your mother likes to hear these things the first:
Run down and tell her.

PHOENIX. But I will just show you
The thrust I gave him—

AMYNTOR. I'm sure you have no notion
Of what a sight you are—African black
With sweat and dirt.

RHODOPE. Are you like that all over?

AMYNTOR. And I can see you're tired out: run off,
Have a good bath, and sleep—sleep a long time.

PHOENIX. But just hear this: I spitted him as clean
As if I had practised it on fifty lions;
Right down into the roaring of his throat
I drove my stroke as he charged slaughtering at me.

[*Re-enter 1st Soldier with sweets and wine.*

AMYNTOR. A fine tale it will be when you are tidy.

But now this lady wants to eat her sweets
In peace.

PHOENIX. Who is she?

AMYNTOR. She 's—O she 's your aunt.
Let us alone now; we have some affairs
Must be talkt out.

PHOENIX. And they are more to you
Than my first lion? And the way I stood
Alone and took him on my single spear?

AMYNTOR. O, he was very likely old and had no teeth;
Or a pet lion strayed: and I have heard
The King of Lokri's lion is gone missing;
The children used to ride on him.

PHOENIX. No, no!
This was a raging beast, a man-eater:
You have not heard the half. He was so feared
No one would beat for us; we had to draw
In wide half-moon a skirmish of our bowmen
Round him, volleying into the likely haunts,
To fluster him with arrows towards my stand.
Listen: I'll tell you.

AMYNTOR. O, this is mere damnation!
Am I to be worn out with the whole world
Bothering at me? I have a grave concern
To settle with this lady—and a swarm
Of noises must needs cluster on my brain
To make a frenzy of me. [*To Rhodope*] Come to my gardens:
There we'll have peace; and I have roses there
From Persia, with a fragrance that will seize
Your heart like yearning.

RHODOPE [*to Phoenix*]. Good-bye, Lion-killer.
I hope you'll never take me for a lion
And thrust me with your spear where I am tender.

[*Exeunt Amyntor and Rhodope. 2nd Soldier comes down.*

1ST SOLDIER. So now you are a hunter!

2ND SOLDIER. The first game
You kill, a lion!

PHOENIX. And alone, mind that!
No one at all was with me.
1ST SOLDIER. A full-grown lion?
PHOENIX. Why, he came ravening for me: I was to be
A mouthful snatcht as easily as you might pluck
A cherry; and I lodged him on my spear
As neat as picking hay up with a fork.
Wait till you see the skin.
2ND SOLDIER. And your first kill!
PHOENIX. O now I know the life for a man! This round
Of manners in a court—it 's puppet-show.
Why should the morning burn into the air
And fill it with blue fire, and shivering grass
Lie gray with dew, and chill woods smell of earth,
If I'm not there to leap awake with mind
Clear as water, and feel
The forces of my body
Keen and tuneable like strings of music?
2ND SOLDIER. Let 's have the whole hunt from the start.
PHOENIX. You shall.
It was a wicked beast. It seems he lived
In smouldering grudge against mankind, and ruled
The country like a demon.—But I must find
The Queen.
1ST SOLDIER. O, they are scouring everywhere for her.
A moment now will bring her here. There 's been
A fever in the place to-day about you.
PHOENIX. What! Am I wanted?
1ST SOLDIER. Ah, has he been wanted!
2ND SOLDIER. 'You must see him! Tell me he is coming!'—
That 's how the Queen kept on all day: and we
Glowering for you up there until our eyes
Stood out like crab's eyes.
PHOENIX. What 's all this about?
1ST SOLDIER. You'll know just now: I have sent word of you
Buzzing to every corner of the palace.
'Twill stir her like a gad-fly.

PHOENIX. What can she want?
The King could do without me.
2ND SOLDIER. Well, he might!
1ST SOLDIER. She 's here!
[*Before they can get back to their posts the Queen enters.*
QUEEN. Phoenix! At last!—How was the sport?
PHOENIX. You have not heard?—A lion, a full-grown lion!
QUEEN. A lion! Was it your kill?
PHOENIX. Mine was the first
Stroke at him.
QUEEN. O, well done!
PHOENIX. And mine the last.
QUEEN. The death was yours?
PHOENIX. First stroke and last were one.
I was alone against him. I thrust once:
And left them nothing more to do but flay him.
QUEEN. Why, we must make a feast of this.
PHOENIX. A feast?
But I hate getting drunk.—And I hate walls
And roofs and beds and being waited on.
I can't feel clean in a house.
QUEEN. Indeed, just now
You don't look clean.
PHOENIX. You know what I would say:
To feel the life in me running clean and bright
And hale as the air between the sun and the sea.
QUEEN. I know. You are young: that 's all you're saying now.
But you must love to live all kinds of moods:
Dangers abroad and pleasuring at home—
I mean you to be first in everything;
And not a soul in the court—no, not one!—
But shall step back from you and know his master.—
But we must see to the feast; and you should wear
The skin. Will it be here to-night?
PHOENIX. O surely;
I left them at it. Soon as the life in the beast
Had shuddered itself still, and those lithe flanks

Sprawled like the slack of a half-empty bag
With their limp hollows and ungainly bones,
I leapt to horse, my glorying hot upon me,
To post with the news myself.—And lucky I did,
It seems: you have some need of me?

QUEEN. I have?
Who told you that?

PHOENIX. But do you not want me?

QUEEN. Of course I want you home, when you hunt lions.

PHOENIX. O was that all?

QUEEN. And what else could there be?—
[*To the sentries.*] One of you, now, find where the King has gone.

1ST SOLDIER. He 's in the Persian garden.

QUEEN. Break in on him.
Give him the Prince's news.

PHOENIX. O he has had it.
It might have been a rabbit I had killed
By what he made of it.

QUEEN. Well, give him this
From me: there is to be no thought of sleep,
But feasting with the Prince all the night through.

1ST SOLDIER. And, I should say, flogging all day for me.

QUEEN. Off now! [*Exit 1st Soldier.*
[*To the 2nd Soldier.*] Is this your post? [*2nd Soldier goes aloft.*

PHOENIX. Father was strange.
If I had a son, and he had killed a lion—
And do you know what whimsy of longing ran
Wild through my brain as I was galloping here?
That I were riding home to my baby boy,
Planning to snatch him out of his cradle and say
'You too will face some day a tawny demon
Springing out of his ambush on you alone:
And you too with the one right thrust of your spear
Will change the terrible graces of his anger
As instantly as, when a sail's cut down,
Tumbling out of its life in the high wind

It cowers in helpless creases on the deck.'
Who was that lady here? Not your sister?
QUEEN. My sister!
PHOENIX. Father said she was my aunt.
QUEEN. Some joke of his. She is just staying here:
No one to do with us. How did you like her?
PHOENIX. How did I like her? I never lookt at her.
QUEEN. Now I call that unnatural.—You there! Soldier!
After your fellow, quick: and tell the King
There is no doubt to-night shall be a feast;
And he should make his orders.
2ND SOLDIER [*on his way to the stairs*]. They'll be made
For me. I can see me put up to fight
A cat-o'-nine-tails, let alone a lion. [*Exit.*
QUEEN. Simply unnatural. In my young days
Lads knew what girls were for.
PHOENIX. Simpering things.
I know right well what the girls think they're for:
It 's to make men look fools.
QUEEN. They're not far out
With some men; and they've managed it with you,
If they have made you scared to look at them.
PHOENIX. Me scared?—I made that lion look a fool;
It 's not a girl will do the same to me.
QUEEN. O, with your glances shying at her, you'ld miss
How she enjoyed quizzing you. I am still
A woman, old as I may be; and don't I know
The giggling little triumph over you
She 's making at this moment!
PHOENIX. I know better.
She will be scowling at the thought of me:
She knows now what it is not to exist.
QUEEN. Well, well: no anger. But she will be thinking
We have odd princes here.
PHOENIX. Yes, if it 's odd
To come home with a lion-skin to wear
After your first hunt.

QUEEN. But that 's what I mean!
She sees you come in here, nerved and sharp-set
After a spell of strained and risky living—
The commonest nobody would be ready then
To take his pleasure—and you are a prince!—
And there she is, waiting for you to take her:
And she—doesn't exist! What is a girl
To gain from being made of lively flesh,
If such a man as you won't look at her?
PHOENIX. This seems a pretty lesson.
QUEEN. O, you a man?
You're still a squeamish boy. I must take you
Seriously, Phoenix. Women know well enough
The sort of world they're in—yes, and like it.
PHOENIX. Well, what of that? I'm in the same world.
QUEEN. You?
You've never toucht the shadow of the world
Women belong to.
PHOENIX. Why, what is their world?
QUEEN. Men, my dear, men.—But let them catch
The world they should amuse scrupling at it—
O the mere glimpse of nicety about it—
And the fun changes sides. I'll not have that
With you, Phoenix; I'll have no half-grown girl
Drolling at you because she sees you blush
To meet her eyes on you.
PHOENIX. All one to me.
For what I care, girls can be full of feelings
As a pot of boiling water is of bubbles:
I am not bothered with them.
QUEEN. Why should you be?
What I am saying is, you're called a prince:
Then be one! not a startled hobbledehoy.
You can face lions: face a girl and make her
Lower her eyes, or it will be her glee
To make a gawk of you in everyone's sight.
And that, my boy, is what I will not bear.

PHOENIX. I'll have a look at her, if that will please you.
QUEEN. You'll find yourself being pleased. And now 's your time.
PHOENIX. Now? She 's not here.
QUEEN. I'm waiting for her, though.
PHOENIX. You've sent for her?
QUEEN. No: but I'm sure she 's coming
As fast as she can arm your panting father
Up the stairs to have his rage out with me.
PHOENIX. Has he been crost?
QUEEN. I've sent him word of things
I must have done, and he is with his roses.
He broods among his roses like a man
Trying to find a hint of a lost dream;
And if the mood is snapt, it lashes back
Like a string overstrained and cut, and whips him
Into a fury that must scold a little.
I hear it coming: we know these harmless storms.

[*Enter Amyntor and Rhodope, followed by the two soldiers, who take up their posts aloft.*

AMYNTOR. You dared break in on me again! I'll make
Your haunting insolence stop short at this.
QUEEN. I'm glad you've come. You'll pardon me: I have
A humble thing to say. Phoenix will give
This lady entertainment while I say it.
RHODOPE. I'm sure he will.
AMYNTOR. Stay beside me.
QUEEN [*to Amyntor*]. What harm?
He must learn easy manners with your guests.—
Phoenix, take this lady aside and show her
Our coastwise outlook. [*To Rhodope.*] It is celebrated.
RHODOPE. I'll have enchanted eyes, if he will take me.
AMYNTOR. What do you mean?
QUEEN. Why, you are slow, Phoenix!
RHODOPE. Come and tell me about the terrible poke
You gave the badger.
PHOENIX. Badger? It was a lion!
RHODOPE. A lion: so it was. Lions, I've heard,

Are just large cats. Was this a tabby lion?
Did it miaow at you?

PHOENIX. Can it be you don't know
A lion is the god among the beasts?

RHODOPE. Does he work miracles?

PHOENIX. He has no need.
At wind of him, the hulking bison's hoof
Pounds such a fury of stampede, the rock
Ten fathoms under earth must ring of it;
And then the lion in an easy bound
Cuffs at his spine, and the careering brute
Somersaults headlong. That is a lion for you.

RHODOPE. And you killed one of these gods all by yourself?
Tell me the whole story.

[*They are by the parapet at back. The King and Queen remain in front, by the stairs.*

QUEEN. He 's just a boy.
No need to scowl.

AMYNTOR. What have you got to say?

QUEEN. I've been a fool. It is only a fool-woman
Loses her temper with a man. And you
Forgot how age rankles in a woman.
Enough of that. I'll be no trouble to you.

AMYNTOR. You've lost the knack you had of troubling me.

QUEEN. Nothing shall be but what is to your liking;
Only your will shall count.

AMYNTOR. And time it did.

QUEEN. You see how it is, though. Here is Phoenix home:
We must not set him vexing his young mind,
Seeing us look malignant on each other.
I would have this affair fleet by his sense
Like an impotent ghost at noon, faint and noiseless.
But if he come home with the heart of a hero
From his first hunt, bragging a lion's kill,
And we've no feast for him, will he not think
Some monster has come striding in between
His life and ours? And there is none unless

We let our rancour grow. Well, mine is dead,
And yours fed upon mine.

AMYNTOR. What do you want?

QUEEN. A feast to-night for Phoenix.

AMYNTOR. When did I say
I would not have him feasted?

QUEEN. So that 's settled:
And you will order for it?—And meanwhile
I'll hint her manners to her.

AMYNTOR. You teach her?
What are good manners but beauty in the act?
You cannot teach her.

QUEEN. O you mistake me.
I only mean, she must not jeer at me:
That would make Phoenix rough with her, and you
Would snarl him down—and at once before his eyes
The thing is notable, glaring at him.
So I will let her see I've changed my mood,
And mean mere friendship now; and you, Amyntor,
You at the feast to-night with her beside you,
You will not let the boy read in your eyes
Contempt of me, and passion worshipping her?
I only ask for this: in all the rest
You shall be free from me.

AMYNTOR. Why, I don't want
A wrangling boy worrying me. Keep him quiet,
I'll play the part. But it is my word now
Rules in the house.

QUEEN. I say so.—It is time
You went about the feast. Tell the steward
To seat the girl and Phoenix in between us,
Phoenix by me and Rhodope by you:
That will look best. Now we are all at one.
But you have much to do; and I must set
Rhodope at her ease with me.

AMYNTOR. I'm glad
This is the way you've chosen. You are prudent. [*Exit.*

QUEEN. I am.—
RHODOPE. Why, this was terrible!
PHOENIX. Pooh, nothing.
There was a dangerous moment—
RHODOPE. O you men!
Always so wild to gamble with your lives!
QUEEN. Now then, you two: I'm bound to interrupt you.
You can finish the story at the feast.
RHODOPE. O you must tell it me all over again!
PHOENIX. I will!
QUEEN. Plenty of time for that to-night.
You'll not be out of earshot of each other
Until the stars go out. Off with you now,
Phoenix: your father 's sure to need your help.
And you have things of your own to mind: the pelt—
Have your men brought it? Is it drest for you
To wear to-night? The feast would be a joke
Without you in your lion-skin. But first
You ought to wash.
PHOENIX. My soul! I had forgot
The filthy state I'm in! [*Starting towards the stairs.*
RHODOPE. Hunters of lions
Need no fine manners.
PHOENIX. Good-bye till the feast. [*Exit.*
QUEEN. It just fell out so: I am sorry.
RHODOPE. Why?
QUEEN. You'll have to pardon me. I did not mean it.
RHODOPE. What is the matter?
QUEEN. But you took it kindly:
I will say that.
RHODOPE. O I'm no good at riddles.
What is it I'm to pardon?
QUEEN. Why, that just now,
During my private matters with the King,
You must put up with Phoenix for a while.
RHODOPE. Put up with him?
QUEEN. Yes: it was good of you.

For of course I know it is old men you like.

RHODOPE. I've told you once, I like what I can get.

QUEEN. You do?—Everything?—I should have rather thought
You would take care to get what you can like.—
Still, it is fine to hear an old man talk.

RHODOPE. Nay, if it 's talking, let it be of lions.
The maundering that has dinned upon my brain
All day! I've had to gape till I felt faint.

QUEEN. I can remember, when I was your age,
I couldn't bear old men: not when they came
Too close, I mean.

RHODOPE. O I am used to that.

QUEEN. Why should we not be friends?—I know I'm old;
And what men are, that is a thing I know.
And as for you, my dear—I'm sure I wish
I was a man myself!—It 's strange to me
How careless of their hours young people are.
It 's their own fault, if the old folk push in
Between them and their pleasure.

RHODOPE. O, we know
How to slip past! Half the fun is in that.

QUEEN. Phoenix is proud about that lion of his.

RHODOPE. He should be proud. It was the sort of feat
They sing of in the ballads.

QUEEN. Do tell him that!—
He'll be beside you at the feast to-night.

RHODOPE. What, sitting next to me?

QUEEN. Of course you'll have
The King's grave speeches in your other ear—

RHODOPE. I'll have them bouncing off the back of my head!

QUEEN. I'ld like to see the lad enjoy to-night.
No sort of homecoming for a young man,
With only his old mother flattering him!—
See if you can't be kind to him a little!— [*Exit.*

RHODOPE. O? Is that it?—I will! I certainly will!
[*She follows the Queen downstairs, laughing.*

2ND SOLDIER. I'm sure she will.

1ST SOLDIER. And if I get the chance
She shall be kind to me; I know the sort.
It pours from one love into another as smooth
And noiseless as a theft of tilted oil
Goes sleek and sliding from the jar to the flask.

CURTAIN

ACT II

The Night of the Feast. The awning has been furled and removed, leaving the palace roof open to the starlit night. On top of each watch-tower a brazier is burning.

The stage is apparently empty. Enter the Queen and Rhodope.

RHODOPE. Delicious air!
QUEEN. But there 's no Phoenix here!
RHODOPE. O we can do without men for a while.
QUEEN. Now where can he have slipt to? I made sure
It would be here.
RHODOPE. Well, it is no great matter.—
The King was right: this is the place. The air
Makes it a blessing to be breathing here
After the frowst downstairs of cookery steam
And smoking torches, and the smell of the wine
The King spilt when he lost his temper with me;
Didn't he shout!
QUEEN. It was just after that
Phoenix slid off. But where, I want to know!
RHODOPE. To find another lion—O I hope not!
For then he'ld tell me about it.
QUEEN. You did not like him?
RHODOPE. A tall young man with a nose as straight as that,
And me not like him? Certainly I liked him.—
I've come to feel, though, it was a mistake
Lions were ever invented.

QUEEN. Boys must talk
Over their doings: you have no need to listen.
RHODOPE. O, when the King is thrilling down my neck
And tickling at my ears with his hoarse fancies
About himself behaving like a god,
Why, gods seem a much worse mistake than lions.
But they must all talk big, one way or another.
QUEEN. I will go look for Phoenix. I am sure
He would be with you if he knew——
RHODOPE. He knows.
I told him I'ld be here.
QUEEN. He can't have heard you.
RHODOPE. It was he had the notion to meet here.
QUEEN. Then where 's he mooning now?
RHODOPE. O let him be.—
I could believe myself at home again
On board the ship, up here: like when we'ld lie
Benighted in a calm, poised in a nowhere
Of breathless dark midway between the stars
That throng the air and the stars that throng the water.
QUEEN. But it won't do to have this slacken now
Into a dawdling business. I must find him. [*Exit.*
RHODOPE [*moving to the back of the stage*]. O, it is taking the cold silver fire
Of starlight into your blood, to breathe this air!
What a simple harmless world it would have been
If they had made it with no men in it:
And no gods, and no lions.
1ST SOLDIER [*lying at foot of watch-tower*]. And no women.
RHODOPE [*tripping over him as he speaks*]. Ow! What are you?—
It is never Phoenix!
1ST SOLDIER [*getting up*]. Pff! That 's better: I have slept it off.
I can always do that with a dose of wine.—
So it is you, my pretty?
RHODOPE. Ssh! The Queen!
1ST SOLDIER. Nay, we are all alone.

RHODOPE. What! Has she gone?—
And how did you get drunk?
1ST SOLDIER. Stole it, silly.
If there 's a thing I want and haven't got,
I steal it, see?—Like this. [*Kissing her.*]
RHODOPE. What arms you have!
Nearly as thick as my legs.—O not too tight!
They're cobble-stones, the bunches of your muscles.
Wasn't it you were the ghost up there this morning?
1ST SOLDIER. I'll show you the kind of ghost.
RHODOPE. Yes, but not now.
O, you won't frighten me in the dark. But here
We shall have Phoenix running in on us,
And he might make you play at lions with him.
Be a good ghost and vanish.
1ST SOLDIER. If I do,
What will you play with me?
RHODOPE. A scoundrel ghost!
I believe he 's in love with me.—Run off;
I'll find you sometime. Leave go, or I'll tickle.—
What arms these are!—Will you be sentry again
To-morrow morning?
1ST SOLDIER. Yes, if you will come
And have the life squeezed out of you.
RHODOPE. One thing
I will not come for: if you try it on,
I'll tell the King of you and have you branded.
Promise you won't, now!
1ST SOLDIER. What?
RHODOPE. Swear on your life
You won't make love to me by talking at me!
I have been seethed in talk since I came here.
1ST SOLDIER. That 's what you get of going with the gentry.
But you'll be safe with me. My love 's no talker.
RHODOPE. You'll do. Give me a kiss and jump.—O look!
Here 's Phoenix come! [*Enter Amyntor.*
AMYNTOR. Where is my heaven?—The god

Returns from earth, hungering to be taken
Into his heaven again.

RHODOPE. O, heaven, is it?
I thought we should be killing lions.

1ST SOLDIER. The King?

RHODOPE. We'll face this out easily. Can you not smell
The wine on him?

AMYNTOR. Ah, she is there, my heaven!—
Why, there are men with you! Who are those men?

RHODOPE. I lost my way downstairs, and these two soldiers
Guided the pair of me here, to stay for you.
Now you have come, they can both go to bed.

[*Exit 1st Soldier.*

AMYNTOR. Those braziers make a puzzling light. It seemed,
Just for a moment, as if it was one man
Walking away.

RHODOPE. O no; they have both gone.
I have been waiting for you.

AMYNTOR. I must have drowzed.
Let me sit on the bench. Stand there before me.

RHODOPE. How many am I?

AMYNTOR. What, will you say I'm drunk?—
O drunk with you, Rhodope, drunk with you!
I cannot tell you. I am the life of the world
Escaping from its fate. Seeing and hearing
And touching are become adorable things.
And it is I go forth triumphing blissfully
Into your loveliness before me, I
Am life adoring its own marvellous senses!
O drunk with you!—and a little drunk with wine;
With wine that is the summer of the gods.

[*Lying full length on the bench.*

Look at it there—summer asleep in heaven:
It is my mind! My mind is night and stars!
I am the depth of that unspeakable blue,
I am that glittering plenty of white delights!—
And I am sleepy.

I had a thought just now. What can it be,
Rhodope, teazing me to bring it to mind?
RHODOPE. Thirst, I should think, after all that.
AMYNTOR. I have it!
Why is there not blue wine?—Summer should be
The colour of everything ours, the mountain summer
Our love inhabits: everything blue as the air
Of noon or midnight, white as snow or the stars.
There must be blue wine: there is white already.
I am very sleepy. [*He falls asleep.*
RHODOPE. Odious old man; nothing but gloat and talk.
But counting him, that 's two. Now where 's the third?
—And how he fools about the stars! The thing
I look for in the stars is what I'm not;
There is enough of what I am down here.—
Ah, what 's this? Do they say, Three for luck?
[*Enter Phoenix, wearing the lion's skin.*
PHOENIX. Rhodope, Rhodope? Where are you?
O you are there, Rhodope, my wonder!
RHODOPE. I have been waiting for you.
PHOENIX. Then it is true!
RHODOPE. That I've been waiting?—You tell me where to meet you,
Keep me loitering for you all by myself,
And ask me if it 's true?
PHOENIX. You must forgive me.
Not till the Queen had told me you were here
Could I believe it, Rhodope—dare I believe it.
RHODOPE. You might have come to see.
PHOENIX. No, I dare not.
RHODOPE. Why? Did you think I would leap out at you
And towze you, lion fashion? But even then
You might have brought your spear, and pusht me with it.
PHOENIX. This is not anger jeering at me?
RHODOPE. Well,
You've kept me waiting.
PHOENIX. But you will forgive me.

Sitting beside you in the noise of the feast,
The thought of being alone and quiet with you
Shot stinging like a spark into my mind.
Before I knew, I had spoken; and heard my words
Like one who wakes up to his own voice raving.
That you would meet me here! I dared not think it.
For it would mean, Rhodope, if you came
To be with me alone here—But you have come!
And you know what it means!—O even now
Dare I think it?

RHODOPE. To think is no great daring.

PHOENIX. To think? Do my hands think? Dare I let them
Take their longing to know the warmth of you?
Let them go loving with their startled sense
Over your smoothness?—I cannot keep them off you!

RHODOPE. No? I am sure you can.

PHOENIX. You are sure? Why?

RHODOPE. Because you do.

PHOENIX [*seizing her in his arms*]. Rhodope, it was this
I did not dare believe.

RHODOPE. You believe now?

PHOENIX. It is so strange to me I might have leapt
Clean into a new world: all that my mind
Has known till now shrivels aside as feebly
As a grey cobweb broken through.

RHODOPE. A world
So strange, there are not even lions in it?

PHOENIX. O I have been a chattering boy with you.
You'll hear no more of that. This morning's pride
Has gone the way of knucklebones and marbles.

RHODOPE. It hangs about you still.

PHOENIX. No, not a shred.

RHODOPE. A whole hide of it: here 's that pelt the feast
So doated on and made such cheers about:
And now is in my way.

PHOENIX. Off it goes, then;
Ridiculous thing.

RHODOPE. Ah, you do like me better?
PHOENIX. I could no longer feel it dangling on me.
RHODOPE. Nor smell it, I dare say. It had a brave
And savage look, snarling on your shoulders.
You are pleasanter to handle, though, without it.
PHOENIX. What should I know now but the blood in me glowing
To beat so near to yours in this slim body?—
O, I have yielded now: I have no will left
But to be life that blends with yours as sound
Chimes into sound. But at the first there was
Some mutiny. My brain baffled with it:
I tried to think against it; and I tried
To think the unbelievable things it promised.
Then, like the seizure of a demon's hand,
And with as fierce a search into my life
As mountain wind blowing an icy sleet,
The strength of it had me. I could not bear it.
I dreaded you beside me. I had to go
Where I could be alone; and like a man
In bitter ailment I went shuddering.
RHODOPE. It is a cruel thing, that shuddering love.
It passes, though; is it not sweeter now?
PHOENIX. So sweet it asks almost for tears.
RHODOPE. And this
Was why you left the feast?
PHOENIX. A slighter thing
Moved me as well. I feared the passion in me,
If I let any anger loose, would drive it
Into some storming folly. And when the King—
RHODOPE. The King?
PHOENIX. Yes: when you would not heed his stories,
And he broke into hubbub like a ruffian—
RHODOPE. Do you not think, if we went somewhere else,
We should be safer?
PHOENIX. Safer?
RHODOPE. Someone might come
Disturbing us, if we stay talking on.

PHOENIX. Was anyone here before I came?
RHODOPE. O no:
I quietly sauntered away the time alone.
PHOENIX. Why, no one will come now. The world 's asleep,
All but our friendship with immortal natures
Here, where the night looks burning down on us,
And the sea joins its counsel to our sweet
Conspiracy; and love delights in us.
Come, we will sit here on this bench—
RHODOPE. No, no:
Not on the bench! there might be dew on it.
I am chilled here. Take me indoors. Please, Phoenix!
[*They are moving towards the stairs, with arms round each other's waist, when the King sits up and stares at them.*
PHOENIX. And you take me to heaven!
AMYNTOR. Did he say that?
Those were my very words, now, in the dream!—
Who is that with you? Where are you going?
Turn back, Rhodope!
RHODOPE. Yes, he would wake up
The instant we were getting clear.
PHOENIX. Who is it?
RHODOPE. I'm not to blame. Anyone would have thought
He'ld sleep the night out.
AMYNTOR [*coming towards them*]. There shall be whips for this.
Whips? They'ld be for the merest fancy of it.
Cords of fire this needs, blazing splinters
Stuck till you bristle like a hedgehog with them.
You should have called to me, girl: or did the beast
Stifle your voice? Who is it? One of those soldiers
Come sideling back to bide his wicked moment?—
Phoenix!—
PHOENIX. There is no matter for this rage.
How could I tell you would be sleeping here?
AMYNTOR. Well I know you reckon'd on me sleeping!
PHOENIX. This is mere wandering. Do you suppose
I came up here to rouse you?

AMYNTOR. No: you came
On tiptoe, in a whispering violence.
What are you here for?
PHOENIX. It is my affair.
But I should think, if you're awake, you'ld see.
AMYNTOR. This is the style, then? You're to make it look
Gay-witted fooling or a vapour of wine—
You in your mood harmless as a feather
Giddy upon the wind—and laugh it off?
You will be lucky if you make me think it.
PHOENIX. Now which of us is crazy?
AMYNTOR. No more talk.
Your guilt stares at me.
PHOENIX. This is tedious.
I am not now the boy you used to check
In every happiness he tried. My guilt?
Choose better words than that, or choose to go
Speechless back to sleep: we will not stir it.
Now, Rhodope.
AMYNTOR. Fondling her under my eyes?
PHOENIX. Why, look away, then!
AMYNTOR. Take your hands from her!
Will you stand mauling her before my face?
[*He leaps forward at Phoenix and clutches his arm.*
RHODOPE. Let me go, Phoenix. You will need both hands
If you must fight for me.
PHOENIX. Fight for you? No such thing.
What 's he to do with us?
AMYNTOR. There'll be no fighting.
When boys are troublesome, we punish them.
He'll right about and march downstairs; and leave us
Quiet together.
PHOENIX. Leave her with you?
AMYNTOR. At once!
PHOENIX. It is not possible!
AMYNTOR. You'll find to-morrow
There are some startling things are possible;

You'll know that by the tingling.

PHOENIX. I have not, surely,
Such a wry mind, I'm making filthy guess-work
Of some mere rambling foolery.—You say
I am to leave her here?

RHODOPE. O but you will not!

PHOENIX. No fear of that. But I must sound his meaning.

AMYNTOR. Must you indeed? To-morrow will not do?
You would start whimpering now?

RHODOPE. I'll not be left
With him again!

PHOENIX. Again?

AMYNTOR. Why, my beloved,
Here 's no anger for you. I do not make it
A fault of yours, that I must scold him from you—

PHOENIX. Plain, plain! Plain at last! Plain and vile!
I've heard of this in tales; scandals of this
I've heard amuse those who will daub their talk
With mess from rotten hearts: how there have been
Fathers who've set their smooth ingenious lusts
To plunder with a relish their own sons
Deliciously!—And I have now to touch
This fabulous infamy!—Ay, and you said
'Again,' Rhodope: 'not with him again':
Was it not that you said?—So he 's already
Tried his meddling with you?

RHODOPE. And sicken'd me.

PHOENIX. I'm sure of it.

AMYNTOR. Rhodope! You are not
Afraid of this young blusterer? No need
To find him pleasant speeches!

PHOENIX. And it 's worse
Than all I've heard of! You come practising
Your sly experience behind my back,
Training your often-handled snares to take her;
And when I find you out you turn on me
In a commanding anger: I'm to obey

The King my father even when he lords it
Over my love! I'm to be meek and hand her
To your sweet mercy!—Fables never made
Lascivious plot so gross.

AMYNTOR. What! My mercy!
But I'll not answer you. Out of our sight!
Your love left to my mercy? You're in a dream.
Your love? I'm sorry for you: leave ours in peace,
And brawl no more about a boyish prank.

PHOENIX. The insolence of old lechery! I believe
He thinks, Rhodope, if I went down from here,
You, of no force but your own liking for him,
Would watch me go, and nestle to him, sighing!

AMYNTOR. And she would watch you go, and ask me why
We have no nursery for you.

PHOENIX. Well, Rhodope?

RHODOPE. What?

PHOENIX. You are bound by nothing. He 's not the King,
He 's not my scheming father. I am a man
And he 's a man: he stays here and I go.
Now it is you to say.

RHODOPE. Stay here or go?

PHOENIX. Your choice.

RHODOPE. It is a joke, to ask me that!

AMYNTOR. And there 's your answer, Phoenix!

RHODOPE. Stay with him
When I could go with you? I tell you, Phoenix,
I will belong to you now. He and his love!
Will I have his old knuckles fumbling me?
Give him old women: they'll be glad of him.
But I'll not hold him up, clinging against me
With bushes in his nostrils and his ears.
Take me away, Phoenix. I loathe him.

PHOENIX. Ay!
And there 's your answer!—Come with me, beloved,
My beautiful fury. You have paid him fairly.

AMYNTOR. No, wait, wait! Phoenix! Do not take her away!
Phoenix, you are stealing her from me!

PHOENIX. There 's been enough drivelling: we'll find some quiet.

AMYNTOR. I'll give you anything you please for her:
Phoenix, I must have her! You do not know
What it has been to find her loveliness
After all these wearisome blank years.
I went with her to heaven. I became
Spirit that was the god of its own life.
This idiot world gleamed about my mind
As if it was the golden flame I made
Quivering round me with my burning passion.
Leave her with me, Phoenix! You are young,
You will find plenty of other girls to love.
But she is mine, the only one for me;
I am the dirt of the earth, if I lose her.
She does not really hate me. Leave her alone
And she'll come round to me.

RHODOPE. She'll not!

PHOENIX. Why should she?
Will you grow young again?

RHODOPE. Give me a kiss
To taunt him: hug me to your very heart! [*They kiss.*

PHOENIX. Heavenly girl. Come now.

RHODOPE. The Persian Garden!
There we'll have peace. And bring the lion-skin:
Terribly cold and hard those flagstones are!

[*Exeunt Phoenix and Rhodope.*

[*The Queen has come in during the latter part of this and stood by unobserved. She now comes forward and stands above Amyntor, who is seated on the bench, head in arms, weeping.*

QUEEN. That is the end, I think.

AMYNTOR. O I have lost her!

QUEEN. You have. What did you think? He can walk through
Your sternest will like walking through your shadow.

Phoenix is young; and you, my poor, rebellious,
Dear, troublesome man, you are not young.

AMYNTOR. Anything but your pity whining at me!

QUEEN. So strong in cranks and notions, and so weak
When there are things to deal with. Always your truth
Was what you wanted, never what must be;
And always your truth lied.—Bruised old fellow!
Desolate as an urchin when his friend
Has pusht him down and run off with his toy
And left him grieving! Come to bed, my dear.

CURTAIN

ACT III

Early morning of next day. The awning is in place again; and the two soldiers are at their posts in the towers.

1ST SOLDIER. Then will you bet on it?

2ND SOLDIER. But she'ld be caught!
There'ld be no sense in risking such a trick.

1ST SOLDIER. I say she'll come. Name your bet: I'll take it.

[*Enter Rhodope.*

RHODOPE. Are you up there? Now which of you is mine?

1ST SOLDIER and 2ND SOLDIER [*together*]. Here!

1ST SOLDIER. You old rascal! It 's me!

2ND SOLDIER. Don't you believe him.
This way, beauty.

RHODOPE [*going up to 1st Soldier*]. I know my blackbird's voice.
Anyhow, I can tell it from a frog's.

1ST SOLDIER. Yah to you, lad.

2ND SOLDIER. My turn will come.

RHODOPE. It will.
You'll know it when I bite you.

2ND SOLDIER. A biter, are you?
You can stay there.

1ST SOLDIER. Have a mouthful of me,

And listen for his teeth to grind. Come close.
Plenty of room up here for two in a squeeze; [*Kissing her.*
And it is that you've come for. Now: this is better
Than blathering with royalty, I think?

RHODOPE. Not a word against the Prince; he 's a good learner.

1ST SOLDIER. Ay, but I don't need learning.

2ND SOLDIER. Whist, you two!
I can hear someone.

1ST SOLDIER. At this time of morning!
[*To Rhodope*]. Still as an image till we know who it is!

RHODOPE. But they can't see us?

1ST SOLDIER. You're safe if you don't jostle.

2ND SOLDIER. Put your foot on her tongue, mate, or you'll hang.
There 's a rage coming.

[*Enter Amyntor with a whip, followed by the Queen.*

AMYNTOR. What? Not here, not here?

QUEEN. Lovers are shy, you know. They hide themselves.

AMYNTOR. My whip 's the lover now. He is not shy;
He'll rout them out.

QUEEN. You had best give it up.
You are too late with your whip. She 's out of reach:
She'll be with Phoenix somewhere.

AMYNTOR. All the better.
He can look on, while I and the one friend
Left to me now, my whip, score her flesh
Criss-cross and scarlet with the way we love her.

QUEEN. O very likely.

AMYNTOR. You think the boy will stop me?

QUEEN. He will not need to.

AMYNTOR. Why, who will?

QUEEN. The girl.

AMYNTOR. Whimpering at me? Pah!

QUEEN. Yes, I can see
Just how you've figured her meeting your vengeance.
She'll scream and quail and bend one frighten'd arm
To blind her eyes, and stretch the other out
Beseeching you to spare? How easily then

You would laugh down upon her kneeling terror,
And make the swooping lash cry through the air
Its shrill zest for the business!—Ah but, my dear,
That 's not how it will be.

AMYNTOR. Not? And how then?

QUEEN. A smiling girl who clasps her hands behind her,
Nodding at you with eyes wide open and impudent
Signalling their gay irresistible gibe—
'Have I not made a pretty piece of mischief?
But it 's done now: come, are we friends again?'—
And while you stand ogling a speechless answer
Of credulous new pleasure, and your whip
Trails behind you limp and harmless, she'll turn
Snickering away, and lead her Phoenix off—
Walking like music: the strength of his young shoulders
Captured in the warm crook of her careless arm.—
No, no, my dear: they've won. Hand me the whip,
And sit here quiet while I hang it up.

AMYNTOR. You'll see who 's won. Yes, I will sit here quiet.
They'll come here before long. I'ld spend my strength
If I went searching further; and I'll want
All the strength my arm can summon—

QUEEN. Take care!
You're brandishing again. I'm sure you've given
Your thews so much fierce threatening to do,
The flogging when it comes will scarcely raise
A blush upon her skin.—But have you thought
Who 's to take Rhodope's place? Would it be wise
To have another young one? It 's hard work
Managing these young things.

AMYNTOR. I manage them
The way I stop the talking of old women. [*Threatening her.*

[*Enter Phoenix.*]

PHOENIX. What 's this? You in an anger? But when she 's heard
The story of last night, slinking will be
The pose for you, and the place for you a corner

Where her indignant scorn will not spy you.
Mother, he tried—

QUEEN. I know.

PHOENIX. So he 's confest?
And looks as glorious about it now
As a gilded thing in sunlight!

QUEEN. I think, by this
His mind 's made up to leave some sports alone.
And the thing now for us all is—to forget.

PHOENIX. I have misst Rhodope somehow.—It cannot be
He has been at her again! [*To Amyntor.*] Where've you enticed
My Rhodope?

AMYNTOR. Would you like certain proof
I cannot find her?

PHOENIX. Well?

AMYNTOR. You see this whip?

PHOENIX. Well?

AMYNTOR. And you see the thong is brown?—the brown
Of tough old slicing leather that can rip
Tatters in any flesh it strokes against?

PHOENIX. Go on.

AMYNTOR. It is too homely a colour for me.
Think what a handsome whip, now, if the thong
Were glazed bright red!—I'ld love to have it so.
But it is brown, you see. Is this not proof
I have not yet found Rhodope?

PHOENIX. It proves
There is a thing more laughably obscene
Than an old man's mumbling lust: it is
A quavering old man blood-thirsty.

AMYNTOR. Lust!
You talk to me of lust! You with your young
Insolent animalism fouling a love
Like mine!

PHOENIX. Like yours! Fouling it!

AMYNTOR. Love like mine
That lived the lofty hours of the gods.

PHOENIX. The yellow flies that mate upon the dung
Might call it that. Your love!
QUEEN. Nay, let him be.
He 's had his lesson; we have tamed him now.
PHOENIX. So you forgive him? That should make his blood
Scald in his heart; but I am not so easy.
And even now the wicked fool is threatening!
QUEEN. And who 's the worse for that?
PHOENIX. Why, you are right.
We'll let him keep his anger, and with that
Be brave in front of us. When we are gone
The stiffness will be out of him, I think.
QUEEN. You are much too hard. You have the treasure safe
He longed for; and you broke his fingering off
Like stepping past a bramble. You're not hurt;
And as for me, I am but sorry his heart,
Which should go quietly nowadays, fell into this
Fantastic fit that must have wrencht it cruelly.
PHOENIX. His thought was to disgrace you; and to me
He meant an injury I will not think of.
Yes, you are right still: we will pity him.
We can do nothing keener: he has failed.
AMYNTOR. Failed? Everything in the world fails but dirt.
The clean things have no power against the dirt.
There is a sort of smearing eagerness
In dirt; and to find any cleanliness
To smear is dirt's delight. Yes, you have won.
PHOENIX. Hark at the injured man!
AMYNTOR. Injured?—And fooled.
I might have known how it was going, when she
Sat heedless of me at the feast and gave
Her mind to the random smirking chat of a lad.
[*To the Queen.*] It was your doing! You told me he was harmless,
And would not have him see your place was taken;
And out of innocent kindliness to you
I kept it from him.

PHOENIX. What did you keep from me?
AMYNTOR. Why, what you now savour so pleasantly—
That Rhodope was mine, my very own,
And I was hers, a life like heaven on earth,
Until you came.
PHOENIX. What do you mean? How yours?
AMYNTOR. How mine? I bought her, I payed money for her.
That made her mine, I hope?
PHOENIX. What lies are these?
AMYNTOR. Lies! Lies, do you say?—Is this a lover's flourish?
You do not really think I'm lying?—O no!
Jests like that don't happen!—But if they did
I would have something good to say for the world.—
Don't disappoint me! Tell me again you think
It is a lie, I bought her.
PHOENIX. An old man's lie,
An impotent imbecile old man's.
AMYNTOR. He means it!
He never guesst his delicate bliss was feeding
Upon my leavings! Astonishing news to him,
His darling had been purchased for my pleasure
Before she thrilled him!—And I will say she proved
Well worth the money.
PHOENIX. I'll put a stop to this.
QUEEN. Both of you stop. You will not change what's happen'd
By squabbling about it.
PHOENIX. I will change
The vile speech in his throat to truth or silence.
AMYNTOR. Ay, look at my fine fellow now! It gives
A jolt to his dainty mind, to know at last
The hackney thing he's been so exquisitely
In love with.
PHOENIX. It is not true, it cannot be true.
AMYNTOR. Dear boy, she was my drab, my concubine.
I paid the price of her like buying stock.
She wanted to be bought: she had her beauty
Shown to me as merchandise.—O let me

Relish this a little! High-minded youth
Clasping his harlot like a maiden love!
PHOENIX. And she does love me.
AMYNTOR. Simple lad! And me
She loved deliciously a day or two
Before you came. She does her art devoutly.
QUEEN. Do leave the boy alone. What do you gain
Tormenting him? Why won't you let things stay
As they have fallen out?
AMYNTOR. I will indeed,
Soon as he has it clear, the way they've fallen.
PHOENIX. I see what this is. The marauding beast
In anguish of the trap—what can it do
But bite and be malignant to the last?
Old fool, if there were any truth in this
Would not the Queen have known it?
AMYNTOR. Did she not know it?
She was after us as viciously and as softly
As a snow-leopard trots along the snow
In winter famine. Rhodope and I
Would make blithe wagers, when we were alone,
How soon her jealousy would nose us out
And tremble at us, glaring.
QUEEN. Blithe, were you?
You lookt it: blithe as murderers haunted.
PHOENIX. Mother!
You knew? And it is true?
QUEEN. O surely, Phoenix,
You can see plain enough by now.
PHOENIX. She was
Bought for his lust? That was why she was here?
QUEEN. You don't suppose I askt her in?
AMYNTOR. And now,
Am I still lying?—Why, if I should tell you
How much she cost me, you would vow I lied.
What did the price of her matter to me? I'ld pay
Anything this insanely reckoning world

Might ask for such a magical release—
QUEEN. Release! From what? From me?—Say it: release
From me! And in the end, where are you now?
AMYNTOR. Caught and stifled again! Don't I know that?
With misery and shame ten times as fiercely
Fastened upon me in a gluttony
Like starving leeches! You need not tell me of it.—
But for a while I was released—O not
From you alone!—from all the world that hugs me
Smothering down, as bird-lime clutches wings.
In the first splendour of my sight of her
The fiery sweet incredible magic came
And cleansed the world from off me.
[*To Phoenix.*] And then came you!
Rousing the dirt you came, hunting your pleasure!
Nothing to trouble you, that when my mind
Could shine like immortality, you flung
Corruption on me again, and seized me down
From my bright freedom to be lapt again
In bird-lime, in the blinding filth of the world.
—Ay, but the rare thing is, you're smeared yourself!
Your feasting love, like men the moon has turned
Into the hungering madness of the wolves,
Awakes from its enchanted gusto and finds
Carrion on its hands and in its mouth.
May it foretell the luck of your whole life!
I wish you may go on as you've begun,
Wenching among the marketable stuff,
And always when the dazzling passion ends
Sicken'd to find yourself plodding in slime.
And it shall be my justice upon you
That never any child shall be called yours
And live: no boy shall thrive to gladden you
After this wickedness: never believe
You will catch son of yours on to your knees
And pour your heart upon him, blessing him,
As I pour my whole heart in cursing mine!

PHOENIX. But this I will not bear. It shall end now.
[*Drawing his sword on Amyntor.*
QUEEN. No, no: he has squandered upon your name
Infamy enough without that.
PHOENIX. You on his side?
QUEEN. Surely on yours. Gather your wits. You know
How I've indulged you. I have let you show him
What you can do one way against him: now
Remember he 's your father. You'll strive with me?
But you shan't reach him.
PHOENIX. Let him keep quiet, then.
QUEEN. I'll see to that. And after all, there are hurts
Not easily borne. You might expect from him
A gusty speech or two. You ruffled at him
To think he merely tried on you the thing
You have done perfectly to him.
PHOENIX. I'll have it
Simple and downright now in yes or no:
Did you know of it?
QUEEN. What, it 's my turn now?
Why, if the wind should change, what a frightening face
You'ld go about with!—Did I know of it?
PHOENIX. Did you?
QUEEN. I've known of queer things in my time;
Which of them all am I to confess to now?
PHOENIX. You knew about—Rhodope and that man?
QUEEN. Well, it is like explaining things to a child.
Soon as you think you are plain, back you are swerved
To the beginning again.—And a dangerous child!
This would have put a handsome end to it,
If after I had so keenly planned it out
And coaxed the whole event into my pattern,
You flared into a murder, and lost me everything!
PHOENIX. But you are worse than he is! You knew the girl
Was for his use, and set me on to love her?
QUEEN. I never set you on. I saw the way
You meant to go, and would not hold you back:

Why should I?—It was too ridiculous,
The sight of him charming the girl! The man
Who goes downstairs peering for his footing
And upstairs with a trouble you can hear—
He to be awkwardly languishing after her,
Blandly priding himself on every look
Her sham love gave him, in between the whiles
She had to turn away for laughing at him!—
If you were there, he would see past mistake
How girls like her are kindled! And you were
Plungeing to be there! Why should I stop you,
When you would show him up even to himself
The piece of elderly innocence I saw him?
And don't make out you are another piece
Of innocence! You could see well enough
Who must be shoulder'd out of his place in the game
To make room for your venture.

PHOENIX [*to Amyntor*]. Dirt wins, you said.
You were right; and thank you for it.
[*To the Queen.*] I could have sworn,
When I came back from hunting, I had found
The life for me. As simple as the feeling
Of my own eagerness, it was in my mind
Why trees are so delighted to be green
When they are sunning themselves. I could live then,
And love to be alive, on the same terms
As trees drink light, and winds are hasty and showers
Stately, leaving the hills where they alighted.
I wanted nothing more; and that is the life
You've killed in me. You twined and plaited me
In with your malice as easily as straw;
But now I see what you have done with me.
I know to what detestable places life,
Speaking like an angel, can persuade me.
You taught me that, and I will pay you for it
The only way I can: I will leave you.

QUEEN. But have some thought for me. I'm not the wife

Who minds her household while the husband 's off
Sweethearting; and the wives whose luck has held
Clack at her name, breathless with relishing pity.
He 's mine, and mine he shall be: let him watch it.
I've never yet been gossip for the women.
And his first fling away from me must be
At home! Daring me to my face he'ld start
His gay old age! As if I'ld let him think
He was the man when you, Phoenix, were by!

PHOENIX. No more of you. You have made me ashamed.
Never again will the roof that houses you
Be shelter over me.

AMYNTOR. I am amused
At this. [*To Phoenix.*] There 's nothing has toucht you, to stir
The hate in you like mine. [*To the Queen.*] So it was you
Roused the calf's blood?—It is a thing to cherish;
Never while I can look on you will I
Forget to foster this.—But the jest is
The way the son thanks his contriving mother
For the sweet hours she helpt him to!

QUEEN. Have done!
You've been the mischief here from first to last,
You with your rage to be booby to a girl;
And now you'll turn Phoenix against me, will you?
You'll finish off the scorn you've thought out for me
By pestering my boy out of the house?
[*To Phoenix.*] Never heed him. Let a few quiet hours
Go by, and you'll be asking what could set
The notion stirring in you, to leave here.

PHOENIX. You do not know what I have lost, nor how
The gash has torn me. It is no wound for time
To close in a callous scar; and I'll not live
Gathering hatred round the sense of it.
I'll go, and never be reminded of you.—
And for a sheen of beauty gleaming thin
As glare a white cloud casts on rotten mire,

I sold my heart! How can such heavenly light
Live on the lying wantonness of women?

AMYNTOR. And you are one to be nice about her, you
The boy who stole into his father's love!

QUEEN. But let me come on her now! Let me pay
My debts to her now, when no worshipping man
Will fend for her prettily blossoming skin! You'll see
How long the heavenly light will stay with her.

AMYNTOR. Keep out! You're nothing here. This is all mine;
And I have promised it to my whip to deal with.

QUEEN. Ay, and where is she? Have you thought of that?

AMYNTOR. What are you fancying now?

QUEEN. Well, where is she?
Not by herself, I am sure: she is not one
For going lonely. But not with you or Phoenix!
Where then?

AMYNTOR. In hiding, I dare say.

QUEEN. And who 's
The lucky man this time?

AMYNTOR. What man?

QUEEN. The man
In hiding with her.

AMYNTOR. What is the nonsense now?
Phoenix and I are here.

QUEEN. That 's what I say:
And she 's not here. My turn to be amused.

AMYNTOR. What breeding minds old women have! We're deep
In shame enough here, without your inventions.

QUEEN. I'm sorry. I forgot how well you know her.
It was a little careless of her, to be
So kind to both of you; but you can count
At least on keeping her in the family.

AMYNTOR [*to Phoenix*]. What have you done with her?

PHOENIX. Why, I came here
Looking for her.

AMYNTOR. This is the silliest whimsy.
I will not let it goad me.
QUEEN [*calling up to the soldiers*]. Have you seen,
Sentinels there, the girl that the King bought
Of the Sidonian pirates?
1ST SOLDIER. She was up here
Yesterday.
QUEEN. What! With you?
1ST SOLDIER. No, no: I mean
Where you are now, my lady.
2ND SOLDIER. I saw her too.
QUEEN. Yes, but to-day, you lout.
1ST SOLDIER. O, has she been
Up here to-day?
QUEEN. Anywhere have you seen her?
Up here, or out-of-doors below?
1ST SOLDIER. I'll swear
She has not left the palace.
2ND SOLDIER. Is she lost?
If you search through the building now, before
She can slip out, you're bound to come across her.
QUEEN. Then you've not seen her?
1ST SOLDIER. Not to-day.
2ND SOLDIER. Nor me.
RHODOPE [*giggles*].
QUEEN. Ha, ha! Now who was in the right? But this
Is better than anything I could have guesst:
Trust her to be perfection in her kind!
The lightest-going fancy will be founder'd
Before it can catch up with her.—Come down!
You must not hide: you are to be admired.—
And now at last, my pair of simpletons,
You'll see what you were treasuring.—Bring her down!
[*Rhodope comes down, followed by 1st Soldier; 2nd Soldier comes half-way down his steps to look on.*
RHODOPE. Mind the lion!—Well, what surly faces!
You might be hunting me in deadly earnest!

QUEEN. What took you there?
RHODOPE. The view is celebrated:
You told me so yourself. You see it best
From the gazebo there, as yesterday
You surely must have noticed, when you were
So long up there looking out for Phoenix.
PHOENIX. Why looking out for me?
RHODOPE. In hopes you'ld come
Quickly and help the King to entertain me.
PHOENIX. Plotted beforehand, was it?
RHODOPE. Not, I think,
Out of favour to me. I never felt
She truly liked me, even though she did
Press me to make the most of my time with Phoenix.
AMYNTOR. She did?—Why, yes: she would.
PHOENIX. Over head and ears
Soused I have been in abomination.
Surely there is a stench upon me like
Flesh the plague is rotting alive.
RHODOPE [*to Amyntor*]. From you,
I know, these looks mean nothing I need dread.
AMYNTOR [*holding up the whip*]. Do you see this?
RHODOPE. Phoenix, you will not let him?
It was you vext him, dragging me out of his arms.
PHOENIX. Why don't you whip her? What are you waiting for?
RHODOPE. So your love 's out of breath? Indeed, young men
Cannot stay like their elders.
AMYNTOR. Then you think
I will not whip you?
RHODOPE. Well, it would be unjust.
AMYNTOR. Unjust?
RHODOPE. It would, after the way I've taken
Care of you. Last night, now: you did not know,
But Phoenix, in this very place—ay, yonder!—
He would have sat on you if I'd not stopt him.
QUEEN. How long is she to go on? Give me the whip.

I will not let her impudence put off
My reckoning. Look at her dimpling there!
I am the talk of the country. It must be
Despising mockery that will shake my heart
Like swallowed poison, if anyone calls me now
Wife or mother: she has done that, and stands
Mincing there as easy and sweet about it
As if it were the forfeit in a game.
And is it nothing, what she has done to you,
Amyntor, and you, Phoenix? Has she left
No stinging touch of her skill festering in you?
What do you seem now to each other? Kind
As once you were—as father and son might be?
What do you seem now to yourselves?—It is
Her doing: her clever work, all of it,
As deep in you as it has gone.

RHODOPE. My doing?
I have done nothing at all. I'm not so old
I have to work for this to happen round me.
I'm simply here or there; and all the rest
The men do for themselves—crowd to do it.
Why should I trouble, if they will keep on?

QUEEN. Right! You are nothing—nothing but your looks!
I do believe there is no evil in you.
You have no ruinous art, no skilful lust:
You have your skin. Let there be sight of it
And handling of it, you are a wild-fire joy,
Unspeakably desired: mind and spirit
Fawn on you adoring.—Give me the whip!

RHODOPE. How can I help it?—Tell me why I should want
To help it, when it is my delight?—But I
Never askt anyone to quarrel about me.
They will take things so seriously, these men!
They make a lot of earnest nonsense up
And talk it at me, when we might be playing;
Then in a crack they're at each other's throats,
And I am to blame if anyone 's hurt!—But why

Must there be all this flustering work about
The simplest easiest pleasure in the world?
Why can't they be like me, the men that love me?

PHOENIX. Well, now we have come to something firm at last
After these crazes: firm and calm as a rock
When laughing sunny wind drives the water
To tear itself to surges to possess it;
And all the sea can do, as it lunges by,
Is to disguise the rock's insensible nature
In rearing glittering flights of spray, as white
And vanishing as love's imagination.

RHODOPE. Now there it is. That is the way they talk.
They will have everything so serious!

PHOENIX. You are right. It is our fault. But I have done.
Your wisdom lights upon me somewhat rudely,
And it may cost me yet a stagger or two
To bear it. But you speak an honesty
Which I can understand: and it is to you
That I will say, with all my heart, farewell. [*Exit.*

RHODOPE. Why, I believe he would come round to me yet.

QUEEN. Lash at her, lash at her now! Catch her, while
Her wantonness is grinning, into anguish,
And let me see how she will dimple screaming!
What, are you stupefied again with her?
I'll ply it for you.

AMYNTOR [*throws the whip down*]. No; no whipping.

QUEEN. Not?
Do you not understand? We have lost Phoenix!
That was a trifling squall, the jealousy
That bluster'd in between you and the boy:
A squall that blows grit in your eyes might be
More troublesome; both of you now have seen
The slut is common.—But what is it she does
That draws the spirit out of a man and leaves him
Hollow for her to play on, as a lad

Draws pith from a stalk to make a whistle of it?
She turns her eyes on you, and there 's an end
Of whipping! Do you think Phoenix will come back?
I know him better: for all he'll be to us now
She might have murder'd him! And there she stands
Facing me down, delighted with her work,
And you, his father, will not have her feel
A stroke for it!

AMYNTOR. Not a stroke. You would be pleased.
Reason enough why she shall not be toucht.

QUEEN. And what is she to have, then?

AMYNTOR. What she deserves:
Contempt. We throw discarded meat to dogs.
She thought herself a feast for a King. The King
Has tasted her; and gives her to his soldiers.
They shall devour her.

RHODOPE [*smiles at 1st Soldier*]. That one first.

QUEEN. Dear fool,
You send her to the stars, living to heaven!
Are you rewarding her because she has
Endured your love?

AMYNTOR. O, end it as you will
So long as it is ended. Rid me of her,
And let me have some peace.

QUEEN. Then we will sell her.

AMYNTOR. The very thing. See to it. I am too tired.
It will be at a loss; but sold she shall be.
I'll know then she is out of reach: and mind
You never even hint where she has gone.

RHODOPE. I'm sure that will be best. I'ld never feel
Quite at my ease here now. You ought to sell me.
But I hope all the Kings round here are not
Kept in so strictly. And if it could be managed,
Don't sell me to a King who 's very old!

AMYNTOR. Take her away.

QUEEN. Why must it be a King?

[*Exit with Rhodope.*

AMYNTOR. But somebody shall smart! [*to 1st Soldier*]. And you will do.
Where is my whip? I am not blaming you:
Nothing to me, where you may choose to drab.
But I must let my torment loose on someone.
Come on: we'll do it thoroughly and gravely.

CURTAIN

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN AT THE UNIVERSITY PRESS, OXFORD
BY JOHN JOHNSON, PRINTER TO THE UNIVERSITY

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